

BY THOMAS COGAN

Patricia Lancaster, commissioner of the New York City Department of Buildings, was the speaker at the Long Island City Business Development Corporation May breakfast meeting held at the Long Island City YMCA. The Department of Buildings can arouse strong feelings among a wide range of New Yorkers, from architects and landlords to tenants, because the city has more than 900,000 buildings, conditions are imperfect in most of them and the department's overseers can often be described with such words as deceptive, heavy-handed or unresponsive. Lancaster implied that even stronger adjectives might have applied when she took over the department. She contended that it is now forward-looking. Breakfast guests were friendly.

The Department of Buildings almost naturally is, and probably has been for as long as it has existed, an occasion of sin, in the form of bribes of all sorts. Lancaster said that corruption was a grave problem the day she assumed office, April 3, 2002, as was consequent low morale; and perhaps as a further consequence, one-third of the departmental staff positions were unfilled. She set about filling the department's vacancies, bought new computers and upgraded others, instituted customer service training for new and in-place employees and put the department's building information system (BIS) on the Internet. She also began enforcing a revised code of conduct, one that was

'Forward-Looking' Buildings Dept. Presented To LICBDC

released to the public just this month, a no-exceptions document whose strictures are designed to enforce honesty. Three ideas for the next three years that are high on her list are facilitation of construction, expansion of information technology and strengthening departmental initiative. But, she told the breakfast audience, it's not enough simply to have good ideas without a good work plan.

The emerging trend in building construction these days, she said, is "building green", which refers to building according to environmental precepts that have been established in recent years. This, she insisted, shouldn't be a choice but a way of life. Others agree, and thus we have Local Law 86, passed last year, which mandates "green" buildings by the beginning of next year. Until then, and at present, the building code of 1968, which is not "green", is followed, but the new trend is so strong (and is not necessarily recent; the New York Industrial Retention Network, or NYIRN, this month honored the Durst Organization for building 4 Times Square according to "green" standards a whole decade ago) that retrofitting

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and what Lancaster called "extra steps" have slowed construction and increased costs. She brought up the Model Code Program, the product of study by some 400 professionals on 13 separate committees. It calls for wider conservation, less reliance on fossil fuels and reclamation of brownfields, sites that have over the course of years, decades and centuries acquired deep layers of pollution. All that, yet with efficiency. Campaigns of safety and sustainability should not become utterly impractical, she said, referring to Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who has said that if it's not practical, it won't be accepted.

Inquiries about landmark status came up. Lancaster mentioned that 30 districts in the city have been designated as landmarks, with perhaps 30 others to attain such designation soon. A woman from one of the undesignated districts, Sunnyside Gardens, asked Lancaster if she should take complaints or inquiries about her neighborhood to Buildings, since she could not resort to the Landmarks Commission. Derek Lee, Lancaster's assistant and head of the Borough Special

Projects Team, understood the inquiry to be about some building or removal that a neighbor was doing. He said the Buildings Department might send inspectors to answer her call but, "Sometimes a chain-saw is faster than a car". He said also that in districts where landmarking rules would apply, the Landmarks Commission is mainly interested in exteriors. When someone from Jackson Heights, which has some landmark designations, asked if there is an official list of landmark districts, Lee handed one to her. Lancaster meanwhile cited a Buildings crackdown on alterations and removals in Manhattan Beach as an example of what the department can do to prevent uncontrolled changes. Eric Greenberg of Green Mountain Graphics in Long Island City asked Lancaster about Local Law 26, which regulates outdoor signage and demands that certain compliances be in effect July 1: he and his "nervous customers" wanted to know if that deadline was really that strong. Lancaster said the date was absolute and regulation would be rigidly enforced, but she smiled as she said it. A woman wanted to know if the Jackson Avenue rebuilding project in Long Island City would begin next year as promised, since she saw signs of delay. Lancaster said she was not informed on that issue, but Gayle Barron of LICBDC was. Barron said that current plans may be tweaked somewhat, but work was bound to begin somewhat on schedule, since the completion date of 2009 has not been altered.

MEMORIAL DAY BUS TRIP TO CALVERTON NATIONAL CEMETERY

Over the years it has come to our attention how difficult it is for survivors of deceased veterans to get to the Calverton National Cemetery. As part of our continuing aftercare program, Thomas M. Quinn Funeral Home is sponsoring a Memorial Day visit to Calverton National Cemetery and what better time of the year to visit than Memorial Day week.

We are extending an open invitation to join us on the trip which will take place on Wednesday, May 31, 2006. The bus will be equipped with a restroom and a box lunch that will be served. This trip will be reserved seating only. There is no charge, but in order to guarantee a seat, you must notify our office by May 26, 2006. Please call to confirm your seat a week before the trip.

If you are unsure of the exact location of the grave, please call Calverton National Cemetery at 1.631.727.5410 and they will send you a map

with the section of the grave. This is very important because the bus will be stopping at each section to drop off the visitors. Please be sure to leave this information with the funeral home when you call to reserve a seat.

A funeral director and staff will be there to assist you. The bus will leave Thomas M. Quinn Funeral Home at 8:30 A.M. SHARP. Depending on traffic conditions and the number of guests, we should return by 4:30 P.M. If you have any questions, please feel free to call anytime. We look forward to seeing you.

Sincerely,



Sean Anderson, Manager
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35-20 Broadway, Long Island City, NY 11106
718.721.9200



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1929 Allen Parkway, Houston, TX 77019
(713) 522-5141