

Board 2 Tables Sunnyside Gardens, Greenway Items

BY THOMAS COGAN

At the May meeting of Community Board 2, six agenda items had to be brought to a vote: four Landmark Preservation Commission (LPC) applications, a Consumer Affairs application and a Department of Transportation presentation on the Vernon Boulevard-East River Greenway. As it turned out, seven votes were cast for the six items. The LPC items were expected to be matters of inquiry, even contention, especially since three of the four were about houses in Sunnyside Gardens, so the scrutiny that followed was no surprise. But the Consumer Affairs application was about a restaurant that everybody seemed to like and the DOT-Greenway item was prefaced with such exhortations as “awesome” and “a terrific plan” by spokespersons from Partnership for Parks and other environmentally conscious groups, so each one’s course would seem to be easier. This was not the case. With these matters and a description of the coming renovation of the Queens Borough Public Library Sunnyside branch, the meeting ran long once again.

LPC cases regarding Sunnyside Gardens have become a regular occurrence. One of the three to be considered that evening was the topic of remarks by Laura Heim, a local architect who had been a strong advocate of landmark designation for Sunnyside Gardens. Such designation was granted last year, and Heim wanted Washington Court in the Gardens to enjoy the benefit of it. Washington Court’s “footprint”, the original layout, has been well preserved, she said, being nearly identical these days to what it was at the outset, 80 years ago. Her husband, Jeff Kressler, said that during the dispute over landmark status, both those in favor of it and those opposed to it wanted footprint preservation. It was threatened by one of these applications, he contended. “When you see the presentation tonight,” he said, “be mindful that no matter how attractive and well-presented it is, it’s a violation of the original plan.”

He was speaking of the second of the Sunnyside applications to be presented. Ann Meyers, architect of the renovation at 39-13 48th St., said the project would restore six-over-six double hung windows and make alterations that would expand the floor space of the house a total of 33 square feet. There was work to be done in both the front and back yards, and in the latter, the back porch would be expanded a total of four feet. Meyers said the plan was well within the floor area ratio (FAR) limitations. Heim said any porch built after 1974 must get special permission for such an expansion; this looked like an as-of-right attempt. When the time came to vote, Steve Cooper, vice chairman of the board, said there should be separate votes for front yard and back. When he got them, Jean Carubia made a motion to approve the back yard extension, saying that as a Gardens resident she was not distressed by it. The votes, by show of hands, first approved the front-yard alterations and the windows unanimously, then secondly registered approval of the back-yard extension by

one vote, with one abstention.

Board Chairman Joseph Conley demanded a roll call vote on the second vote and got similar results, but then Tom Casey, a board member who had left the room for several minutes, returned and, pleading ignorance because of all he had missed, abstained. Those who voted no claimed victory; a letter would be sent to the LPC pointing out that vote and the two abstentions.

In contrast, the first application, concerning front porch and sidewalk repairs at adjacent houses on 47th Street, sailed through because the designer, Kevin Keating, was replacing what he said was a jerry-built porch construction from a decade ago with a design that would raise the porch steps and provide low brick walls behind which unsightly trash cans could be kept. He lives in the house with the porch and his father lives next door, where he wants to replace a deteriorated sidewalk. The third application, like the second, ran into trouble. It had to do with a design for a sliding glass door in the rear of a house on 47th Street. The designer, Vivian Curry, said a previous design had been rejected and she was trying again. At voting time, some board members said the design was still inadequately described. Dorothy Morehead, a Gardens resident, nevertheless made a motion of approval, saying such doors had become standard fixtures on that block. Not many were persuaded to agree, since the votes cast against the motion numbered nearly twice as many as those in favor of it.

The two last LPC applications were for buildings in Hunters Point. The first application was for extensive repairs of building and

grounds at 21-47 45th Ave. There were questions about a rear-yard extension and window replacement but the plan as understood seemed amenable to most of the board. Sheila Lewandowski, a new board member and Hunters Point resident, said the builders exhibited an arrogant attitude toward some inquiring neighbors, but she nevertheless approved of the renovations. Only two disapproving votes were cast. The second application was from Pascal Escriot, owner of Tournesol, a restaurant at 50-12 Vernon Blvd. He is seeking to build an unenclosed sidewalk café with four tables and eight chairs. The trouble grew out of a question about what he intended to do with a nearby tree. Escriot was not there to explain and his sister, speaking for him, could not adequately describe the proposed brickwork in the pit provided for the tree. Cooper moved to table the application until there was an explanation, but other board members said the outdoor dining season was approaching and the owner needed an answer quickly. The unanimously approved motion that followed included a demand for an explanation of the plan for the tree pit and an answer to a question about the barrier between café and sidewalk traffic.

The Greenway show was presented by the Department of Transportation’s Ryan Russo, who was promoting cycling as “a real transportation choice.” He spoke of bike lanes along both sides of Vernon Boulevard that would take up 11 feet of space on a two-way street only 45 feet wide. The route would include an off-street bikeway through Queensbridge Park. After hearing Russo’s talk and seeing the illustrations projected for their information, board members were skeptical. One, Al Volpe, was doubly so, noting that in addition to taking up space on a narrow street and in the process removing pre-

cious parking spots (more than 100 on Vernon Boulevard), the Greenway planners were ignoring the considerably wider 11th Street, one block east. Both Russo and Penny Lee of City Planning replied that 11th Street was considered. However, it runs only to Queens Plaza South, where it is blocked by the bridge ramp, while Vernon Boulevard proceeds under an arch and all the way up to Astoria Boulevard. Also, 11th Street is a heavy truck route and therefore hazardous, though trucks use Vernon Boulevard, too. Steve Cooper asked why bike lanes are needed on both sides; Russo said that formally, bikers are traffic and must go with the flow. In fact, said Lee, below 45th Avenue there are no bike lanes, only symbols denoting the presence of a bike route. Board Member Lisa Deller said a letter could be sent to DOT saying that approval was dependent on beginning the route above 45th Avenue at 44th Drive. But Cooper made a motion to table the matter that was accepted with relief. More work on Greenway remains.

Jimmy Van Bramer, board member and Queens Borough Public Library official, described the renovation of the Sunnyside branch at 43-06 Greenpoint Ave., which would necessitate closing the building for four months while library traffic is conducted out of a temporary trailer. The architect, James Cornejo, said the renovated library would have a 24-hour book drop, improved signage and wi-fi capability. Van Bramer was asked about a plan to expand the library from its current 7,500 square feet to 18,000, and could answer only that the current budget provides an allotment only for renovation. On the other hand, a great deal of money, \$14 million, has been allotted to construction of the Queens West library, he said. The plan is to begin construction while the quest for another \$5 million proceeds, he added.

Maloney Calls On Congress To Extend Unemployment Benefits

BY JOHN TOSCANO

Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney called on Congress to pass pending legislation that would provide an immediate 13-week extension of unemployment benefits for 3.2 million jobless Americans who are looking for work.

“Labor market conditions today are already as bad as or worse than when unemployment benefits were extended in previous recessions, so there is no reason to wait to provide additional benefits to unemployed workers now,” Maloney reasoned.

“Extending unemployment benefits would help families continue spending on basic living expenses and simultaneously provide an extra boost to our weakening economy,” she added.

Maloney (D-Queens/Manhattan), who is vice chair of the Joint Economic Committee (JEC), said that according to a recently published JEC report, evidence is mounting that the unemployment picture is worse than when unemployment insurance (UI) was extended during previous recessions. She noted:

- Long-term unemployment is at recession levels and already higher than when Congress extended UI benefits in the 2001 and 1990-91

recessions.

- 1.3 million workers have been out of work and searching for new jobs for at least six months.

- Unemployed individuals claiming UI benefits recently rose above 400,000 per week, a level at which economists typically consider the labor market to be in a recession.

- The share of the U.S. population with a job never fully recovered from the 2001 recession and is lower now than it was the last time UI benefits were extended.

- More than one in three unemployed workers (35.6 percent) exhausted their UI benefits last quarter.

- More than 1.3 million workers will exhaust their UI benefits between January and June 2008.

Maloney said the JEC paper suggested three specific ways to expand unemployment insurance:

- 1) Provide extended benefits to workers whose regular unemployment compensation has expired.

- 2) Supplement the amount of benefits paid to unemployment compensation recipients, and



- 3) Modernize the UI system to cover more unemployed workers, including more part-time and low-wage workers.

In addition to immediately providing up to 13 weeks of extended unemployment benefits to workers exhausting regular unemployment compensation in every state, the Emergency Extended Unemployment Compensation Act, which Maloney supports, would also provide an additional 13 weeks, for a total of 26, in states with high unemployment (6 percent or higher).

The benefits would run through January 2009 and be financed by the federal unemployment trust funds, which now have more than enough reserves to cover the cost.