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### **Want It Landmarked?**

## **Queens Civic Congress Shows You How**

By Phil Guie



*PHOTO CAPTION: (Left to right) Preservationists Kevin Wolfe, Herb Reynolds, Simeon Bankoff, Frank Sanchis, and Councilwoman Jessica Lappin at last week's Historic Preservation and Landmarking conference.*

Maybe a property doesn't need to be 100 years old to qualify for landmarking, but that won't make the process any easier.

According to experts at The Shops at Atlas Park in Glendale last Tuesday, who had stopped by to participate in a workshop and conference on historic preservation, anyone interested in seeing a building, property, or object maintained as is should be prepared to put in considerable time and energy.

Flakes need not apply, said preservationist Herb Reynolds, whose group pushed for the landmark designation of Sunnyside Gardens.

"A decade appears to be the amount of time needed," he said. "I can't tell you how absolutely time-consuming landmarking is."

More than 60 people turned out to the conference Tuesday night, which was hosted by the Queens Civic Congress. Besides regaling attendees about how long they've been working on saving particular sites, the experts explained the landmarking process in detail and discussed potential obstacles.

They said the process by which a property is designated begins with a Request For Evaluation (RFE) form listing as much information as possible, including photographs and slides. After the RFE is submitted, a specialized committee and the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC), a city agency, take turns reviewing the materials and discussing whether it meets the criteria for designation. If it does, the LPC may vote to schedule a public hearing.

The City Planning Commission and City Council weigh in once LPC has finished deliberating. Currently, there are roughly 90 designated historic districts in the city as well as 1,100 individual landmarks.

One of the panelists, Councilwoman Jessica Lappin, who also chairs the City Council subcommittee on landmarking, said the number of designated sites outside Manhattan is on the upswing, and listed the 116-year-old Voelker-Orth Museum, the Jamaica Savings Bank in Elmhurst, and the 240th Street Home in Douglaston Hill as examples.

Meanwhile, Queens Civic Congress Executive Vice President Patricia Dolan said the zoning proposals recently withdrawn by the American Institute of Architects showed the public exerting influence on the city.

"Just remember: if you show up, you'll win," she said.

Panelists listed the following strategies for winning: shepherding a project all the way to the City Council and building bridges with politicians. To that effect, Kevin Wolfe of the Douglaston and Little Neck Historical Society, which is involved in talks to expand the Douglaston Historic District to protect additional homes dating back to the mid-1800's, advised those who do their own research to share what they find out with LPC, which is a relatively small agency. The information should also be submitted to the City Planning Commission, which under ideal circumstances reviews the RFE next.

"When someone goes to the records office [for the city], now they're ahead of the curve," Wolfe said. "You're giving them information, and that's valuable."

As for getting elected officials to jump on the bandwagon, given most City Council members are term limited, candidates looking ahead to their next post may be especially receptive to a landmarking backed by huge numbers of potential voters.

Neighbors can build support on their own, but Lappin said council members make a big difference. However, some officials may be philosophically opposed to landmarking on the grounds it interferes with property rights.

"If that's what someone believes, you're not going to change their mind," she warned.

But Simeon Bankoff, executive director of the Historic Districts Council, said overwhelming support for a landmarking is capable of swaying a public official. He also said there is a difference between one building and a district when it comes to property owners' rights. "If you can show that the majority of people are really signed on to this, you're dealing from a position of strength," he said.

Reynolds - who advised attendees to "look for interesting murders, that sort of thing" in their neighborhoods, given a landmark need only have architectural or cultural significance - said his group went door-to-door collecting supporters' contact information on cards. They made an indelible impression once delivered to the local councilman.

"That not only impressed [him], but it impressed opponents," Reynolds said. The panel also noted some property owners oppose landmarking out of fear they will lose control over their sites, not be able to get permits to do certain improvements, or see their property values plummet.

With regards to the latter, Frank Sanchis, senior vice president of the Municipal Arts Society, which supports good urban planning and ethical architectural practices throughout the city, said historic districts have been shown to increase in value faster than surrounding neighborhoods because they are nurtured through the landmarking process.