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TIMESLedger.COM

03/06/2008

Boro preservationists learn landmark ropes

By Alex Christodoulides

Invoking the names of the fallen as cautionary tales - Ridgewood Reservoir, St. Savior's, the Klein Farm - community preservation activists met last week with old hands to find out how to landmark Queens' historic neighborhoods and buildings.

The community room at The Shops at Atlas Park was full of neighborhood activists as City Councilwoman Jessica Lappin (D-Manhattan), chairwoman of the City Council Landmarks Committee spoke at a historic preservation and landmarking workshop organized by the Queens Civic Congress.

"The designation process starts with people like you who are active in their communities," Lappin said. "The people who oppose something always come out, but the ones in support don't always come."

Frank Sanchis III, senior vice president of the Municipal Arts Society and a fellow panelist, mentioned the statistic that Queens ranks last in landmarked buildings in New York City and said it was the result of the building materials used.

"They're [the Landmarks Preservation Commission] looking for integrity and a sense of place" in designating a historic district, he said.

The meeting took place all of 12 hours before demolition began Feb. 27 in Maspeth on the 1847 St. Savior's building, in which developer Maspeth Development LLC bought the property in 2005 to build condos. Activist Christina Wilkinson announced at the workshop that the demolition permits for the church had been issued Feb. 25.

The anxiety level climbed in the room after the announcement, and Fresh Meadows area activist Bob Harris told the panelists that the Klein Farm on 73rd Avenue was locked in a similar tug-of-war between developer Tommy Huang and local preservationists.

Herb Reynolds, director of the Sunnyside Gardens Preservation Alliance, said that getting the Historic Districts Council on board was key to getting neighborhoods landmarked, but warned that the process could take years.

Sanchis said Manhattan and downtown Brooklyn get the lion's share of landmarks because their structures are masonry, which is harder to modify, whereas many Queens buildings are wooden.

"It's true that wooden buildings are easier to alter, but I've seen an astonishing number of masonry buildings get aluminum siding," Sanchis said, adding that reversible changes should not deter residents from seeking landmark status.

Resident Renee Levine asked what could be done in her Kew Gardens neighborhood, where reversible changes were taking over.

"One by one, the 100-year-old houses are being turned into garbage with gold this and concrete that and Home Depot doors," she said.

Wolfe offered her a simple plan of attack: "You have to get your ass in gear," he told Levine. "There have to be areas that are viable, and the blocks [proposed for landmarking] have to be contiguous. You need passion and you need people to help you out."

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