

08/04/2005

On Board: Vote for improvements a battle at CB 13

By Bob Friedrich

Those of us who have spent innumerable hours resurrecting a dying community into a successful and vibrant homestead of thousands work very hard and are proud of the work we do. It was this group, the board of directors of Glen Oaks Village, that pushed an idea we call value added improvements, whereby we allow and encourage people to make improvements to their co-op apartments.

Some of these improvements have taken the form of decks, skylights and separate apartment entrances facing the back grassy areas of our co-op. As this idea has taken root in the community the next phase was to allow the addition of dormers to our buildings so that second-floor residents could use the already existing attics as living space for their crowded families. The only thing we needed was a variance that would allow us to raise the roof a maximum of five feet in the worst case scenario for some of our buildings.

Advertisement If the issue had been to protect the endangered species habitat of the snail darter or the desert tortoise, I suspect there would have been a unanimous vote of approval by Community Board 13. But when it comes to improving the quality of life of working class folks who live in Glen Oaks Village, the self-appointed apostles of standards deny them the benefits they themselves have.



Bob Friedrich

As president of the board of directors of Glen Oaks Village, I attended a meeting of CB 13 seeking their approval of our variance request. I was outraged not by the vote of CB 13 but the sheer lack of effort that was put into any thought or understanding by those we empower to make these decisions for us.

Glen Oaks Village is a two-story garden apartment complex that sits in the shadow of North Shore Towers and, as its name suggests, towers above all others in northeast Queens. So I was shocked that the North Shore Towers resident member of CB 13 abstained from voting. When I asked him why, he said he was concerned about the effect that our variance would have on the views of his residents. How outrageous. I work too hard to have someone living in a more than 35-story building giving me an answer like that.

An elderly woman who has been on the board for many years and lives in a private home with the types of amenities we are seeking for our residents also voted no. The changes, she told me, would be no good. Glen Oaks should not change. I told her that sometimes a little change is good and if we did what she suggested and stayed static, Glen Oaks Village today would have been a bankrupt community with a transient tenancy, the course it was on prior to the current board taking control of the reins.

Oh yes, there were some reasonable questions, but the answers didn't really matter to questioners. A concerned board member wondered how the sewage system would handle the additional residents, how the garbage removal would be affected and so on. I responded that the change we are seeking would simply give existing families more room and not increase their numbers.

Instead of two children sharing one bedroom, each could have their own. Mom and dad could have a master bathroom and not have to share it with others. This doesn't place additional burdens on the infrastructure. The same family members are not using more water, but are sharing a more spacious apartment and no longer have to wait to use the bathroom. Nevertheless, this community board member still voted no.

Another CB 13 member said that at first it will be only one additional floor and soon it will be three, four or five floors. I told him that's incorrect. The variance only permits five feet of additional height and besides the board has a vested interest in maintaining the character of the buildings and would never support such a proposal. It didn't matter. He still voted no.

On and on it went and this is just a small sampling. Beware, one day these people may be called upon to make a decision that affects your quality of life.

The Chairman of the Land Use Committee of CB 13 and supporter of our proposal asked the members of CB 13 to raise their hands if they have ever been to Glen Oaks Village. Fewer than a handful of palms could be seen. Now, Glen Oaks Village is the largest single component of CB 13 and when only a small handful of people acknowledge that they are familiar with the community and then vote no to a proposal to enhance the quality of life of the thousands that live here, I have to ask what is going on?

Don't get me wrong. People are entitled to their opinions and their vote. But when they are put into a decision-making position that affects so many others, they have an obligation to prepare for the meeting, which means visiting or familiarizing yourself with the community. And when I am told some of the members of the CB 13 didn't really understand the proposal and just fear "McMansions," that simply is making excuses for people.

In the end, thankfully, 16 members including the chairman of CB 13, Richard Hellenbrecht, supported it and it was adopted 16 to 13. It now goes to Borough President Helen Marshall's office for review. I went in there thinking that this simple idea to stem the outflow of families to the suburbs and keep them here in the city was a good thing for the community and would be embraced by the board. Boy, was I ever wrong. I am sorry to say that giving people the power to deny others the benefits they themselves have is alive and well in CB 13 and reminded me why I gave up my CB 13 seat many years ago.

Bob Friedrich is the president and CFO of Glen Oaks Village Owners Inc., the largest garden apartment cooperative housing complex in New York, and has been a member of its board since 1991. It is a non-paid, volunteer position with oversight responsibilities for 85 employees and a \$22 million budget. He is chief financial officer of a public relations company in Manhattan.

©Times Ledger 2005