

A LOCAL GARDEN HIGHLIGHTS

A SOUTH BRONX COMMUNITY BOARD MEETING

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Under the view of a local cable newscast camera, on November 21, a group of gardeners and activists from a local group, voiced their displeasure and shock as they announced to the members of the Board District 1 that day's arrest of three gardeners and the bulldozing of a nearby garden, in the South Bronx.

"It is a shame that gardeners are arrested and criminals go free," said Marty Rogers, long-time Bronx resident and a member of the MoreGarden Coalition, an interest group dedicated to preserving the South Bronx community gardens. Mr. Rogers said that the arrest took place at 3:00 a.m. of November 21, at 141 Street and Crimmins Avenue, while the men slept inside the Hostos-Crimmins Community Garden. The activists used the sleep-in type of protest in order to prevent South Bronx Church Nehemiah Corporation, a non-profit community development organization, from bulldozing the lot for housing construction.

Dr. Amanda Bernal-Carlo, a Natural Sciences professor from Hostos Community College, was at the Board meeting standing next to the group of gardeners showing solidarity. According to the professor, the city had given the lot to South Bronx Churches Nehemiah Corporation back in 1990, but the lot was abandoned and turned into a garbage dumpster.

The college, together with the community, cleaned up the area and grew a garden on it. For 14 years the garden was under the college's care and various community activities were conducted in the garden, including urban research projects, health fairs, and the growing of herbal plants. "This destructive sacrifice of nature is very sad not only to the institution, but to the community and to the whole city," Professor Bernal-Carlo said.

South Bronx Churches Nehemiah Corporation was not available for an interview but sent a statement that said:

"We have delayed the development of housing on this site [Hostos-Crimmins Community Garden] for as long as possible, and have given the gardeners three years to relocate. We have made several attempts over the years to find alternative sites for the gardeners...but they were not interested." The statement further said that the Corporation had in the past month offered the gardeners an alternative site on 138 Street, and offered to help move trees and other plants to the new site.

But the offer was also rejected. Professor Bernal-Carlo, from Hostos Community



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College, refutes the statement by saying that the site offered by the corporation is a public recreational space, which is not the same as having a private lot for a community garden. The professor plans to write a letter to South Bronx Churches Nehemiah Corporation asking for reconstitution of hardship and losses. "It was more than just a garden we lost, we lost part of our community and the accomplishment of funded activities that were scheduled to take place in the garden next spring," Professor Bernal-Carlo said.

Activist Liam Burnell, 25, just released

Activists together with local residents have battled the city for years to keep community gardens from being turned over to developers

from spending 36 hours in the 40th precinct, said that the arrest was unexpected, "It was like being stabbed on the back with a knife," said Mr. Burnell. "I really thought we had some kind of a deal going with the contractors."

According to Mr. Burnell, on October 15 the gardeners received notice from South Bronx Church Nehemiah Corporation to vacate the lot because it was marked for bulldozing. Immediately, the local gardeners contacted the activists from various organizations, and together with Professor Bernal-Carlo, and Vice-President Sandra Ruiz from Hostos Community College, began to organize a drive to preserve the garden.

The college offered to buy a lot in another location and then trade it for the garden. Activists searched for empty lots and found

at least 30 other lots that could of been chosen as an alternate site for construction. Mr. Burnell said that South Bronx Churches Nehemiah Corporation did not respond to the negotiation offers, but the construction contractors, "made us believe that a deal might have been possible."

South Bronx Churches Nehemiah Corporation, with its main office located in Port Chester, is an association that represents 40 churches that serves the South Bronx with various social programs. In 1999 the Corporation in partnership with New York City Housing Preservation Development (HPD), received from the city the deed to the garden lot for \$1 with the agreement to begin construction of low-income housing.

Activists together with local residents have battled the city for years to keep community gardens from being turned over to developers. In 1999, Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, in response to the city's housing shortage crisis, announced plans to auction the city's garden lots to the highest bidder. This decision caused immediate action from advocates, such as, New York State Attorney General, Eliot Spitzer, who delayed the city's development plans when he sued to prevent it from auctioning garden land to the highest bidder.

Also, singer Bette Midler donated \$4.2 million through her group, Trust for Public Land, and purchased 100 sites, some of them in the South Bronx, which will be maintained as permanent community gardens.

According to the New York Times, on September 18, 2002, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg settled the last administration's lawsuit by setting aside 200 community gardens and giving them permanent site status. However, in a compromise, more than 150 parcels are slated for private development of low-income housing. Any plots to be developed will, however, go through a public review process giving the gardeners a chance to find a way to preserve or relocate their gardens. Hostos-Crimmins Community Garden did not have permanent

site status and the activists, together with the community, tried for three years to prevent the garden from being bulldozed.

At the last month's, (October 24) Board meeting, Aresh Javadi, leader of MoreGardens Coalition, was told by the Board members that he was "out of order," when he interrupted the meeting to announce that the South Bronx Churches Nehemiah Corporation was threatening to bulldoze the Hostos-Crimmins Community Garden. The Chair allowed Mr. Javadi to continue speaking, even though the Board members were annoyed by Mr. Javadi's persistence.

Mr. Javadi asked the Board's help in preventing the bulldozing of the garden and said that such gardens are vital for good air quality.

According to his organization, the Bronx has 0.2 acres per 1000 persons of green open space, compared to 3 acres in Brooklyn and yet, the Bronx, with the highest rate of asthmatics in the nation, lacks enough open space to clean the air from pollutants. But the Chair, Mr. Rodriguez, dismissed his appeal by saying that "there are other alternatives to clean the air, such as planting trees on roof tops." Ms. Nicole Brown, a librarian at the Woodstock branch, who was sitting in the audience, said that Mr. Javadi had attended many previous Board meetings to speak about community gardens and that the Board members were tired of hearing about the "same thing over and over again."

Nevertheless, at the November's meeting, the Chair, after hearing the protests and appeals from the activist and local residents, responded in front of the Channel 12 News camera, by saying that he would refer the matter to the "appropriate committee" to be resolved. Meanwhile, activists are urging the community to call Council member Jose Serrano, Bronx Borough President Adolfo Carrion, and Mayor Bloomberg to protest the bulldozing of Hostos-Crimmins Community Garden and to demand the permanent status of all green spaces in the Bronx.