ANGRY NEIGHBORS, CB9 MISTAKES STALL DCP'S REZONING STUDY

by Milford Prewitt

It is a curious and confusing Community Board 9 meeting in late March—where police had to escort some protestors out—a long-awaited vote to permit the Department of City Planning (DCP) to finally begin a rezoning study in Prospect Lefferts Gardens went down.

It didn't go down in defeat; it went down in confusion. According to news accounts, the land-use committee of CB9 had just voted to send a letter to DCP authorizing the agency to start its work. But they soon rescinded it when protestors pointed out that board members who are not part of the committee, voted. But even more embarrassing, the vote had taken place after the meeting had adjourned.

There were no real winners or losers because the board intends to meet April 16 to vote again.

The major mistakes conducting a formal vote do little to mask what is really causing CB9's dysfunction and DCP's unease: the divisiveness accompanying the neighborhood's gentrification and the suspicions among some community leaders that the rezoning study is the first step to wholesale hi-rise development that will displace low-income, longtime residents.

Winston Von Engel, head of the DCP's Brooklyn office, says the agency's only agenda is to help communities in their land-use goals and it is ready to begin the study in PLG.

With 23 years at the agency, Von Engel says he has seen community divisiveness before.

"Every community board and every neighborhood in New York City is unique," he says. "There is no overall norm in terms of community reaction to rezoning studies or efforts to change land uses."

Long before 666 Flatbush toppled at 23 stories (in seemingly world record construction time), Prospect Lefferts Gardens' neighborhood groups, community leaders and lay citizens were united in their outrage about the size of the building and possible future developments.

With no building height limits in local zoning codes, a new group called Prospect Park East Neighborhood was formed to seek an injunction to stop the project while CB9 asked the DCP to conduct a neighborhood land-use study.

But after more than a year of meetings with city officials, zoning workshops and demonstrations, the seemingly endless "Zoning for Quality and Affordability Proposal" has become pigeon-mailed with allegations of racism and classism, fears of low-income displacement, the expansion of fixed-income retired homeowners and divisive personal and public attacks among community members.

The most antagonistic group against the DCP study is also the most anti-gentrification group, the Movement to Protect the People. MTOPP's activist leader Alicia Boyd has charged that the rezoning study is actually a smokescreen to "upzone" (increase density and raise building heights) in the neighborhood, especially on Empire Boulevard. A Sterling Street homeowner, Boyd's backyard abuts Empire Boulevard.

Von Engel insists that the DCP has no ultimate motive other than to serve the community and the city. He refused to speculate why groups like MTOPP and like-minded activists harbor suspicions about the agency's work.

"You need to ask them that," he said.

"What I can tell you is that our mission is to work with communities. And the mayor has been very clear that for the city and communities to meet their goals, there has to be a process that involves every community participation from the ground up and it's going to involve every community board group, and every elected official.

"We don't come in with a prepared zoning plan. What's important is for the community to agree, to come to a consensus. It's important that a majority of the community agree on the goals and priorities."

Although it was too late for PLG to do anything about zoning changes to reduce the size of 666 Flatbush, given that the developers were within their rights to build tall under existing zoning codes, Von Engel encouraged the neighborhood's efforts to update the zoning codes.

"What the neighborhood can do is to start doing in response to that building and that is to ask for a land-use study of the area, to see whether zoning could be changed for future buildings," he says.

(continued on page 3)

Rutland II’s Spirited and Beloved “Miss Ida” Mae Henderson Dies at 100

Ida Mae Henderson, a retired NYC Board of Education principal administrative associate and who was affectionately called “Miss Ida” among her Rutland II neighbors, died at 100 years old on March 19.

She fell and fractured her hip in mid-January and was strong enough to undergo hip surgery at Methodist Hospital. From there she was transferred for rehab at the Center for Nursing and Rehabilitation, where she died peacefully in her sleep.

"I knew they were not going right when she didn’t want to watch Jeopardy," her son, Leonard Henderson, said. "She loved that show."

Ida lived on Rutland II with Lenny and his family for the past 27 years.

Sitting out front with other elders in the block “Miss Ida” and company were many years Rutland II’s unofficial greeters and welcoming faces when neighborhood kids and adults returned home from school or work.

Although she had a hard time walking and negotiating steps, Lenny said his mother was in good health and exhibited little of the illness associated with advanced age.

Mrs. Henderson was born in Watertown, Mass., in 1914. At the age of five, she moved with her mother to Elmsford, N.Y., a tiny Westchester County community where she met and married Leonard Weaver Henderson Sr. in 1935.

During World War II, Mrs. Henderson was a black version of “Rosie the Riveter,” the women who kept America’s industrial production moving while the men were overseas.

In Mrs. Henderson’s case, she worked as a welder at the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

Her husband served in the Pacific theater during World War II and later he would be with the first segregated black Army units to enter Japan after the U.S. dropped atomic bombs to end the war.

“My mother was convinced that he died early because of what he was exposed to in Japan,” Lenny said.

Henderson Sr. died in 1951, just six years after the war ended.

After the death of her husband, she went to night school, took accounting classes and eventually worked for the New York City Board of Education.

Mrs. Henderson was possessed of a sharp mind, danced at parties as recently as three years ago, loved playing cards and putting together jigsaw puzzles.

In September of 2014, neighbors used the annual Rutland II block party to celebrate Ida’s one hundredth birthday.

In an interview with the Echo, Lenny said he is survived by daughter-in-law Lauren Dong and their daughter, Caitlin Alice Henderson.

THE LEFFERTS MANOR ECHO is published by The Lefferts Manor Association. Please send comments or article ideas to editor Milford Prewitt at milfordprewitt@aol.com. The Echo reserves the right to edit or omit article submissions. We thank the contributing writers, photographers, graphic designer Ken Diamond, and copy editor Jane von Mehren for their help creating this issue.

©2015 Lefferts Manor Association.
Emerging Vocalist Alexis Hightower Sings the Praises of PLG

by Rina Kleegue

Alexis Hightower, a rising singer, songwriter, and most recently, pianist, is a relative new comer to Prospect Lefferts Gardens. But she’s already in tune with the lyric most neighbors have been singing a long time: “I love this neighborhood.”

Since moving to Sterling II three years ago, she says she has been impressed by her neighbors’ community involvement and the friendliness of residents. She even used her neighbors’ children on one of the songs on her newest album, Girl Next Door, already being hailed as a breakthrough work.

Alexis says she loves that “the quality of life in PLG lends itself to the creative process. It is peaceful, with points of inspiration like Prospect Park and the Brooklyn Botanic Garden—places which have the best gift shop.”

Her parents love to visit the neighborhood, too. Before buying their home on Sterling II, Alexis and her boyfriend, a fellow musician, had some disappointments, including signing a contract on one property that was eventually lost to a cash buyer. “Sometimes negatives make you more determined,” Alexis said of the house-hunting process that eventually led them to PLG.

She created spreadsheets listing the qualities of each house they saw, from zip codes to number of bedrooms, to help them focus on what they wanted and could afford.

She knew PLG through a visual-artist friend who grew up here, and after looking in other neighborhoods, they saw and fell in love with the house they would ultimately purchase on Sterling II. After several years in the making, the Lefferts Community Food Cooperative (LCFC) opened its doors last fall at 334 Empire Boulevard (near New York Avenue). The small shop owned and operated by neighbors offers bulk foods, organic produce, and locally sourced items at the lowest possible cost.

What makes a food co-op a co-op? Unlike most small businesses, LCFC is staffed by members-volunteers. Rather than trying to generate a profit, the store focuses on serving the local community. The pay for shoppers: lower prices. But shopping there isn’t your typical consumer experience. In order to make purchases, members must work a two and three-quarter hour shift once every four weeks. This keeps the overhead down and lends the space an inescapably small-town feel: with its small size, member-workers quickly get to know one another and their regular shoppers.

“I bring my 6-year-old to my Thursday afternoon shift,” said member Carrie McLaren. “Often it’s like a series of impromptu playdates for him. We know a lot of the kids who come in the door. And those we don’t, we soon get to know.”

Initially organized by a handful of PLG and Crown Heights residents in 2009, the cooperative now includes about 700 working members and continues to grow steadily in inventory and membership.

What kinds of things will you find at the co-op? LCFC focuses on whole food items that members can use every day to cook their meals. This means a lot of bulk, natural products and fresh seasonal items. The bulk selection contains many varieties of rice, oatmeal, quinoa, couscous and other grains, beans, dried nuts, dried fruits, and baking supplies such as flour, sugar, and salt. The store offers a range of cooking oils, nut butters, cleaning and personal care supplies. It also carries milk, eggs, yogurt, cheese and meats. Inventory items are selected based on a variety of criteria: popularity, regionality, organic or conventional, nutritional value—all weighed against the price for that item.

All members are investors in the cooperative business. To join, new members invest $25 (or $25 for those with a low income), of which $20 is a refundable share that a member decide to quit. Members serve on a range of committees that are required to run a business, such as membership and scheduling, finance/bookkeeping, sourcing and buying, inventory, cashing, maintenance, building, communications, and administration.

The store is currently open on Thursdays from 6 to 8 p.m. and Sundays from 11 to 6. As it grows, the co-op members expect to be able to expand their hours. Anyone is welcome to visit the store and membership is open to all. Please visit leffertsfoodcoop.org or call 718-373-0500 for more information.
**Faithful Friends**

Faithful Friends, a long-running personal tailoring house whose male clientele comes from every walk of life, has moved from Park Slope to Prospect Lefferts Gardens. For 14 years, tailor and proprietor AB (who requested to be identified only by his first and last initials in this article) operated Faithful Friends at 26 Fifth Avenue at Flatbush, virtually across the street from the Barclays Center. Informed that the building is to be razed in two years, AB immediately began looking for a new location and found just what he was looking for in PLG at 406 Flatbush in January, right across the street from Planet Fitness.

He says he couldn't be happier with the move. "I love this neighborhood," AB says, who lives in Canarsie. "You can't beat the convenience and the Q and the B are only two stops from where I used to operate.

"Plus, being on the first floor street level where people can see our storefront and not have to climb a staircase is a big advantage in this business. Everybody who does this in Manhattan—and there are few of us left these days—those customers have to climb to the fourth or fifth floor to get to them."

Wearing his signature bow tie with a well-cut blazer, AB at first cut the profile of a preacher or an English Lit professor. The store is named after the people who live in Guinea, West Africa, AB's birthplace.

He says he knew as a child that he was instinctively gifted to become a tailor. He is largely self-taught but admits there were some apprenticeships and more training working in fabric houses along the way.

**New Businesses Thriving in Small Spaces**

**SMALL QUARTERS ARE NOT A BIG ISSUE FOR ERV'S AND PILLOW TALK**

Erv's is smaller than a studio apartment. But what it lacks in size, it more than makes up for in conviviality and cocktail temptation.

Located in the middle of the block on Beekman Place, Erv's fills a unique market in Prospect Lefferts Gardens. It serves quality coffee, espresso drinks and pastries mornings and afternoons, and then it converts into a specialty cocktail lounge that also serves tamales until closing time in the wee hours.

Overshadowed amid the highly anticipated debuts of Midwood Flat and Bluebird Café late last summer, Erv's deliberately had a quiet opening last October.

But Erv's has quickly won a flock of loyal regulars—fans in and out of PLG—who word-of-mouth and digital kudos have carried to a high honor: It was named one of the "50 Best Bars in Brooklyn" by The F. Magazine, winning its "Best Secret Cocktails" category prize.

The honor stems from Erv's expansive, appetizing and creative menu of sophisticated signature house drinks, cocktails and mixes and some of which even the most veteran bar stool warmers may have never heard of.

Most drinks are $10 and happy "hour" lasts from noon until 7 p.m.

The partners behind the joint are PLG resident Steve Fishman, a New Yorker magazine political and culture writer, and Robert Giles, a Flatbush native who currently resides in Clinton Hill.

The place is named in honor of Fishman's father.

Giles, a self-taught bartender—and who prefers the word "bartender" to "mixologist"—says he sees the 95-seat Erv's as a "concept bar," inspired by such slick drinking places as Milk & Honey in Manhattan.

A couple of years ago, Giles was on his way to Taiwan to apply his cocktail expertise at a new venture there, but the job fell through. His brother, who worked with Fishman as a fact checker and who knew of his colleague's long-pent-up desire to open a bar here, introduced the two and a partnership was born.

Despite the place's size, Giles says it's still large enough to feature entertainment. On Sunday nights, live music and spoken word performances are offered at Erv's.

It seems fitting that Pillow Talk Lingerie, an intimate apparel and sleepwear boutique for women of all sizes, would be in one of the smallest storefronts to be found on PLG's Flatbush corridor.

Located at 666 Flatbush, opposite Watchpost Street, Pillow Talk's size is conducive for the semi-private customer service and assistance Michelle Davis offers men who might be exploring temptong bedroom wear for their mates or plus-sized women who like to find comfortable sleepwear.

Davis, a lifelong PLG resident and never—say—die entrepreneur who was the bubbly host and partner of the late Café Exhale, opened the boutique about two years ago.

She says both men and women share some misinterpretations—largely spawned by the media—about intimate apparel.

"Men and women have some misconceptions about lingerie," she says. "People think it is only about sex. Men are visual creatures who see it as a kind of gift-wrapping and most women think if they are not size six or eight, they can't wear it."

"You see Victoria's Secret and other media with skinny models and it sends a message to larger women that this kind of clothing is not for you. But I'm about empowering women of all sizes to embrace every inch and curve and channel their inner-sexy. We have something for all sizes and curves."

Davis says even from childhood, she loved women's intimate apparel and dreamed about being involved in the business one day.

"I always liked frilly, pretty panties even when I was a kid," Davis says. "My mother helped by always buying us new pajamas. On the holidays we would always get new robes and slippers."

"It just dawned on me, what if I went into a business that did that?"

Little Pillow Talk got a major boost of national exposure last summer when the hip-hop culture magazine, XXL, featured garments from the shop in its "Eye Candy Issue," featuring local models.

More recently, Davis has launched a website, pillowtalklingerie.com. Refusing to look back on the closing of Café Exhale, Davis says Pillow Talk is a new horizon with unlimited possibility.

"I was broken when Café Exhale closed," she says. "But I'm a fighter. I don't give up! My drive and determination give me energy."

**DCPs REZONING STUDY STALLED**

(continued from page 1)

Hoping that PLG community leaders and neighbors will take a page out of the Crown Heights community board's playbook, he described the collaboration and consensus that ensued in approving a new land-use study that recommended all future buildings not exceed a height of 13 stories on residential blocks characterized by low-rise brownstones.

"Their priority was to prevent out-of-character buildings and avoid issues similar to the one associated with your 666 Flatbush," he says. "So we worked on a 12-story plan that addressed the height limitations, especially on the side streets that are dominated by four-story brownstones."

"We decided together to allow a modest increase in density that would take advantage of affordable housing."

Von Engel says the DCP is far more engaged and much more energized to work from the "ground up" since Mayor de Blasio took office.

"I would say that what we are doing in the community in terms of outreach and consensus is far more expansive under this administration than the past one," he says.

One reason for that, Von Engel states, is that DCP is one of the key agencies the mayor will depend on in reaching his goal to "create or preserve 200,000 affordable housing units: 120,000 being existing housing units" before he leaves office.

"We are an agency under the mayor and the mayor is elected by the people and so we support maximizing his policy objectives and housing plans," he notes. "But building communities is a comprehensive plan. It's not just geared to housing. There is an economic development and arts part to it, too and there is a capital budget to meet those goals."

He has spent 31 years in the business, earning a nationwide reputation as a master tailor of menswear, be it formal, business or casual. He wouldn't name names, but claims his clientele range from box-office celebrities, sports superstars, Wall Street fat cats, elected officials and common working men who are all drawn to his singular expertise, customized suits.

AB believes that no matter one's station in life, every man should have two custom suits in the closet—one blue and one grey. Suit prices at Faithful Friends start at $950.

But he laments that personal, customized tailoring is an endangered business if current retail, industrial and customer trends continue. "The casualization of office attire, off-the-rack retailing, and the ubiquity of pop-culture fashion designers who know nothing about tailoring, fabric or stitching are squeezing out old-school tailors," he says.

"Anybody can be a designer, draw something on a page and come up with an idea," he fumes. "But master tailoring is a craft. It's an art. And you need experience to excel. Unfortunately, it's a dying art.

"If you called me a designer, you insult me! I'm a master tailor."
**Bikram Yoga Studio Evolves into a Mini Wellness Center**

Hot, sweaty yoga is the signature, trademark service of the new Lefferts Avenue Bikram Yoga studio specialists in 365 days a year.

As the studio settles into its newest location above the beverage distributor at Lefferts and Flatbush Avenues, it is making a name for itself in Prospect Lefferts Gardens with some allied amenities for all residents—with or without memberships—to improve health, nutrition, foster peace of mind and encourage neighborliness.

What the studio has on tap is nothing less than a miniature community wellness center. Consider these activities:

- **Community posings classes the first Friday of each month for members and nonmembers who pay a donation that goes to allied non-profit organizations.**

- **Monthly special posing classes for newbies and veterans, usually the first Saturday of each month.**

- **The hosting of a weekly farm-to-neighborhood fresh food pick-up service through the online farming community, Farmigo (see related story below), and**

- **A diverse array of certified talents and expertise of its yoga practitioners to teach all manner of self-improvement practices, including aromatherapy and massage. Music recitals by members may also be in the future.**

Considered a standing, open-eye meditation that improves concentration and mindfulness, Bikram yoga consists of 26 beginners’ poses (including two breathing exercises) for 90 minutes in a room that is heated to between 100 and 105 degrees. The method helps advance weight loss, boosts flexibility of the muscles and joints, and improves cardiovascular fitness and body strength.

The heat serves as a kind of metaphor or substitute for whatever daily challenges, problems or goals yoga face outside the studio. As such, the heat becomes a test of wills and mental fortitude, best summoned up by the yoga instructor’s mantra: “If you can stay in this room for ninety minutes, deal with this heat, and concentrate only on the instructions, think about what you can do when you get outside.”

## For a stronger community, join the Lefferts Manor Association

The community-supported agriculture movement is expanding to a second location in Prospect Lefferts Gardens.

Some three years after the Maple Street School partnered with a farm-fresh food delivery service, the new Lefferts Avenue Bikram Yoga studio is teaming up with a like-minded farmers network, Farmigo.

Farmigo, the organization’s in-use by its team of urban farmers in Brooklyn, works with farms and farmers to make it easy for consumers to enjoy fresh local produce from the farm directly to the consumer. The organization’s goal is to ensure the sustainability and health of the food system.

Farmigo offers a variety of products, including fresh produce, meats, dairy, and seafood, all sourced from local farms and producers. The organization prioritizes small-scale, sustainable farming practices and aims to connect consumers with farmers and local food systems.

Farmigo has a strong track record in the community and has established a reputation for transparency and sustainability. By partnering with Farmigo, the Bikram Yoga studio can offer its clients a unique and rewarding way to support local farmers and enjoy fresh, high-quality food.

Farmigo’s offerings are available for delivery to the studio and surrounding neighborhoods, making it convenient for clients to access fresh, local produce directly from the farm. This partnership allows the studio to offer its clients a unique and rewarding way to support local farmers and enjoy fresh, high-quality food.

Farmigo’s partnership with the Bikram Yoga studio highlights the increasing importance of community-driven initiatives that support local farmers and promote sustainable agriculture. By partnering with Farmigo, the studio can offer its clients a unique and rewarding way to support local farmers and enjoy fresh, high-quality food.

Farmigo is committed to providing high-quality, sustainably sourced produce and meats to its customers. The organization partners with a network of local farmers and producers to ensure that its offerings are fresh, flavorful, and responsibly sourced. By partnering with Farmigo, the Bikram Yoga studio can offer its clients a unique and rewarding way to support local farmers and enjoy fresh, high-quality food.

Farmigo’s partnership with the Bikram Yoga studio highlights the increasing importance of community-driven initiatives that support local farmers and promote sustainable agriculture. By partnering with Farmigo, the studio can offer its clients a unique and rewarding way to support local farmers and enjoy fresh, high-quality food.