

Putting it in park

By Dawn Wotapka Hardesty

Friday, January 20, 2006

As president of the Kings Park Neighbors' Association, Linda Henninger was a big reason the state cancelled its latest deal to sell the long-abandoned – and contaminated – Kings Park Psychiatric Center to a private developer with plans to clean it and build thousands of residences. Henninger, described as a relentless activist, helped mail thousands of letters up the government chain and held rallies to make sure the community's voice was heard.

How did you help kill this project? Now that's a loaded question, when you say 'kill this project'. This project wasn't right for our community. The people of the community understood that, and eventually the state understood that.

I'm playing the proverbial devil's advocate here. What is wrong with a proposal that cleans contaminated land, attempts to help the housing crunch and sets aside parkland? First of all, I'm not sure what parkland they were going to set aside. That, I don't think, is a clear representation of what was happening here. ... It wasn't so much what is going to be there but the amount of what is going to be there. ... In this instance, clearly the state polluted the land and clearly the state has to clean this property up.

What would you rather see fill the site? It has to be developed in a way that's really going to benefit the community's way of life and the economic well being and that's going to be a process. I'm not saying it's going to be easy to find the right balance.

The [Cherokee Arker Kings Park] development team thinks this decision sends a "chilling message to others in private industry" and it "delays the town from leveraging the property to generate new property taxes and economic growth." Why are they wrong? I think the only thing it delays is money in their pocket. I think that this is an instance that is very unique. We have such a large tract of land on the North Shore of Long Island that is heavily contaminated. ... Kings Park deserves better than having a developer come in to make a fistful of money, which that's what private developers do and harm the quality of life for the people who live here. The state needs to step up, take responsibility, which is what they've started to do.