

'Tenacious' advocate for Kings Park community

Linda Henninger of KP Neighbors' Association is Woman of the Year in Civics

BY ELIZABETH W. SOBEL

Civic Leader Linda Henninger and members of the Kings Park Neighbor's Association received an early Christmas present when the lawsuit filed by developer Arker Companies and Cherokee Northeast, LLC to force the sale of the Kings Park Psychiatric Center (KPPC) property was dismissed in New York State Supreme Court on December 12 by Justice Elizabeth Hazlitt Emerson.

"We're on cloud nine," Henninger said about the decision. "It was a well-written decision and all we could have asked for."

It has been a long road for the residents of Kings Park who could have faced over-development and a loss of tax revenue for the school district if the verdict had allowed the developers to construct the planned high-density housing. The effort was made under the leadership of Henninger who never gave up, whether the organization was tackling the issue of development in general or taking the position that someone had to clean up the mess left when the psychiatric center was

abandoned. For her untiring efforts, Linda Henninger has been named *The Times of Smithtown Township's* Woman of the Year in the area of Civics.

"The mantra has always been, 'Stop the sale and clean up the mess,'" Henninger said just hours after having learned of the decision. "But this is just the beginning."

Henninger said she wouldn't stop until the majority of the land is placed in the Nissequogue State Park to preserve the important revenue stream for the school district, through state payment in lieu of taxes, and to preserve what would be state parkland. Secondly, Henninger wants to see the remaining 92 acres transferred to the Town of Smithtown to maintain local control of the property.

Kings Park resident Rob Trotta said Henninger, an attorney by profession, has focused all along on the environment and the good of the community. "She had a good grasp of the issue," Trotta said. "She knew she didn't want Kings Park to look like Nassau County. She knew the worst thing would be to take this property out of the state's hands and she recognized that Kings Park was about to be overdeveloped."

Henninger has been heralded as a driving force in acquiring money to have the site cleaned up. She and her supporters picketed in front of State Senator John Flanagan's office to drive home the point that state money was needed to do the job. She said Flanagan finally saw her point of view and acquired \$25 million, about half of what will ultimately



Photo courtesy Linda Henninger

Linda Henninger has been a vocal participant in the Kings Park Psychiatric Center property discussion.

be needed to rid the property of asbestos and possible chemical emissions from the power plant.

"Linda is tenacious and passionate about her community," Flanagan (R-East Northport) said. Despite "a few bumps" earlier in their relationship surrounding the potential sale and impending remediation of the Kings Park Psychiatric Center property, Flanagan said, he and Henninger had worked well together on more recent issues regarding the site.

"She works hard for the betterment of her local community," he said.

Resident Mike Rosato said Henninger is tenacious and relentless when she is fighting for what she believes in, whether it is the current issues surrounding the psychiatric center, the good of the school district, or an equally current issue with the 50 acre St. Johnland's continuing care facility property adjoining Sunken Meadow Park.

Community leaders and Senator Flanagan have presented St. Johnland with the option of swapping the untouched woodland adjoining the Nissequogue State Park, onto which they plan to expand their facility, for a piece of the psychiatric center property. Their undeveloped land would then be added to the state park, with the possibility of a private access road built through to connect the St. Johnland campus. Henninger would like to see this plan adopted, Rosato said.

"The most important thing to her is protecting the schools and the almost \$1 million in tax revenue from the state if the Kings Park psychiatric property is included as parkland by the state," Rosato said.

Trotta called Henninger an "amazing" woman who is "dedicated beyond comprehension." He added, "She is about doing the right thing. She spent hours away from her family to make the community better for her kids and for residents. No one deserves this award better than she does."

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—MIKE ROSATO OF KINGS PARK