



Fort Independence Park Neighborhood Association

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FIRST KOPPELL FIGHTS HIS OWN CONSTITUENTS ... THEN HE THREATENS THEM!

On Monday, March 8 members of the Fort Independence Park Neighborhood Association (FIPNA) were shocked to hear Councilman Oliver Koppell express unwavering support for a project they vehemently oppose. He then held hostage his support for a proposed Fort Independence Historic District in a bizarre trade-off he devised.

In the evening meeting in the Councilman's Waldo Avenue District Office, Koppell came out aggressively in favor of Urban Pathway's proposed supportive housing facility on Cannon Place. His support for the project is over the objections of his constituents and fellow elected officials and it contradicts the stance he took in a recent letter to a concerned area resident in which he claimed to have not taken a position. And he seems to have forgotten that in 1991 he opposed a homeless facility on Fairfield Avenue.

The 68,000 sq. ft. Urban Pathways development has been a sore point of residents of Van Cortlandt Village and Kingsbridge Heights. These residents oppose the astronomical construction cost to be borne by taxpayers, the lack of concern as to what the construction of a large building will do to this small street, the impact on this stable neighborhood, the lack of community and urban planning, the ignoring of community concerns, the ignorance of the topographical challenges on the site and the dangers they pose, and the warehousing of homeless people in large buildings to line the pockets of developers.

Koppell flatly denied that squeezing the huge project onto a small resident street would hurt the aesthetic appeal of the neighborhood or undermine its historic significance.

"No. It will have no impact," he told the flabbergasted community members. Despite attempts to reason with him, he hardened and insisted, "You can't change my mind."

He repeatedly referred to a nearby affordable housing project—Villa Avenue Apartments—as an example of successful supportive housing that had “not caused any problems.” When activists pointed out that Villa Avenue Apartments was not even supportive housing, he appeared confused.

Discussion of compromise went nowhere. He brushed off the notion of making the

project smaller so it could be a more manageable within the residential community. "It can't be done smaller," he insisted. "Smaller would be too expensive."

"But supportive housing is done at smaller scales all over the country and by many organizations in the city as well," said community resident Kristin Hart who was present at the meeting. "And this project is outrageously expensive."

Koppell also scoffed at the potential high costs. Even if it cost \$1 million for each person to be housed, he said, at least those people would be housed. He then made his threat in the form of a quid pro quo: He won't support the notion of a Fort Independence Historic District if it would in any way infringe on the housing project.

"Clearly the Councilman has abandoned the notion of representing his constituents," Hart said. "He's so out of touch with our needs that his motives have to be questioned. Is this about political favors for the mayor? The developers who are turning the problems of the homeless into a cash cow at the expense of taxpayers? Or is he once again trading his public office to curry favor for his wife's real estate business?"

"The proposal for an historical district should be judged on its own merits," said FIPNA Vice President Karen Argenti, who described the meeting with the Councilman as a very unpleasant experience. "I have respected Council Member Koppell's reasoning ability and political acumen until the meeting last Monday, but now I am perplexed and disappointed. He's obviously out of touch with his constituency, ignoring their concerns in favor of some as-yet-unknown agenda. This is wholly unacceptable for any local elected representative."

He's also out of step with the Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz, Jr., who said in his State of the Borough speech on March 5, 2010:

"For too long, City Hall has embraced the mindset that what is good for developers is what is good for the five boroughs, with little regard for the real needs of the community. Planning should drive development; development should not determine our planning.

Our land—our most important and valuable natural resource—has been taken from us through zoning and the sale of air rights. Development plans have been created with little or no input from the communities that will host these new projects. Developers have been handed millions of dollars in taxpayer subsidies, and in return, we have received part-time jobs without benefits that offer few, if any, chances for advancement."

Councilman Koppell has been elected to represent the interests of his constituents.

How are the constituents of this community served by his support for this project?