

Illegal lot in Whitestone shut down

BY GINA MARTINEZ

The city last month officially closed down a Whitestone lot used illegally for commercial storage that neighbors and pols including state Sen. Tony Avella (D-Bayside) fumed over for nearly two years.

Avella celebrated the Department of Buildings-led padlocking of the site last week, making a victory visit to the lot on 24th Ave. between 149th and 150th St. that he first demanded local officials shutter back in 2016.

The parcel, which is owned by Whitestone contractor Salvatore Valenza, sits in a residential zone, but was being used to store commercial-construction materials, equipment, and debris, prompting the state pol and residents to complain about its unsightly and unsanitary conditions.

"The owner egregiously flaunts the law by storing his commercial trucks and construction materials, including gravel, bricks, wood, and tools

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LIC waterfront project hits snag

City's plan for residential complex draws rebuke from Van Bramer, Nolan

BY BILL PARRY

The city will have to make some changes to its plan to allow a developer to build a massive 1,000 unit residential complex on public land

along the Long Island City waterfront, according to City Councilman Jimmy Van Bramer (D-Sunnyside).

The project, in which TF Cornerstone would build two towers

— one 64 stories tall and the other with 50 stories — would require a zoning change that would need Van Bramer's blessing during the public approval process as the representative of the district.

"I was never for this project, but I was waiting to see what the final plan looks like," Van Bramer said.

While the plan has yet to be certified or begin the ULUURP process, Van Bramer is not liking what he has seen.

"The amount of greenspace they're offering is very small and the amount of affordable housing is insulting," he said. "You can't allow a developer the opportunity to build on city-owned land and only offer 25 percent affordable. That is insulting. That's wildly unacceptable to me and the community."

State Assemblywoman Catherine Nolan (D-Long Island City) was an early opponent of the project, firing off a letter to Mayor Bill de Blasio less than a month after it was presented in August saying the proposed buildings "are too massive for this area." Nolan suggested instead that the land be used for much-needed parkland while preserving a portion as a wetland to help in flood mitigation.

"I urge Mayor de Blasio and the NYC Economic Development Corporation to take a step back, put the RFP on hold and listen to the community, civic organizations,

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PLAYDATE FOR 300



During the mid-winter recess, the Police Athletic League hosts a Tournament of Champions at the Ed Byrne Center in South Jamaica. More than 315 kids attended for a chance to participate in everything from 3-on-3 basketball to science and tech projects.

Photo by Michael Shain

Appeals court favors Sandy victims' lawsuit

BY NAEISHA ROSE

The New York State Court of Appeals handed down a favorable decision for dozens of Rockaway residents and business owners on their lawsuit against the Long Island Power Authority and National Grid, LLC, according

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The dual Uncle Sam statues will soon be removed, along with Nazi and racist images in the lobby after a notorious property manager was forced to resign.

Sunnyside condo manager ousted

BY BILL PARRY

The property manager of a Sunnyside condominium who became the focus of multiple state and city investigations after he was accused of intimidating and harassing residents has resigned from

the condominium's board of managers in a settlement the city's Commission on Human Rights announced last Friday.

Neal Milano, 70, and his "one-man reign of terror" were exposed by Councilman Jimmy Van Bramer (D-

Sunnyside) after he toured the lobby of the building at 47-55 39th Pl. in August, where he found displays of Nazi and Confederate imagery, swastikas and symbols of hate on every wall, and even the names of infamous Nazis Josef Mengele and Ru-

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Attorney General sues anti-choice protestors

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BY NAEISHA ROSE

Anti-choice protesters who allegedly harassed women who approached the Choices Women's Medical Center in Jamaica between 2012 and 2017, were in federal court in Brooklyn for the past two weeks, a spokeswoman for Planned Parenthood said.

State Attorney General Eric Schneiderman brought a suit against 14 anti-choice protesters on June 20, 2017 after surveillance video depicted one of the demonstrators advancing toward a woman who had her child with her as she tried to enter the center at 147-32 Jamaica Ave.

The individuals are charged with violating the New York City Clinic Access Act.

Pearl Brady, a volunteer for Choices, was on the stand as a witness for eight hours at one of the hearings.

According to Emily Kadar, a representative for National Institute for Reproductive Health, Brady recounted specific incidences with protesters from her time at the center from 2015 to 2017.

"One of the people she spoke about was Ron George, a pastor at Church of the



Anti-choice demonstrators are being sued by the attorney general for allegedly harassing clients of a clinic that provides abortions in Jamaica. Google Earth

Rock," said Kadar. "She said when he followed patients he would ignore their requests to go away. She said another defendant was Patricia Muscom who was often recording patients and taking notes about them."

Public Advocate Letitia James, Councilwoman Helen Rosenthal (D-Manhattan) and state Sen. Leroy Comrie (D-St. Albans) publicly con-

demned the protesters for the alleged harassment.

"As we witness attacks on women's rights at the federal level and in state legislatures across the nation, I applaud the attorney general for demonstrating a steadfast commitment to protecting reproductive health-care rights in New York state," said Comrie.

According to Schneider-

man's lawsuit, "protesters have subjected incoming patients to a barrage of unwanted physical conduct as well as verbal abuse, threats of harm and lies about the clinic's hours and its services."

The lawsuit contends that Pastor Kenneth Grieppe of Church at the Rock, located at 1288 East 92nd St. in Canarsie, Brooklyn, was leading some of the protests by gath-

ering up to 23 people outside the center every other Saturday from 2012 to 2017.

Current and former members of the church who are also being sued are Randall Doe, Osayinwense Okuonghae, Anne Kaminsky, Brian George, Sharon Doe, Deborah Ryan, Angela Braxton and Jasmine Lalande, according to the suit.

Dorothy Rothar, a Sister of St. Joseph, who works with Helpers of God's Precious Infants, an anti-abortion religious organization in Brooklyn, is also being sued.

The remaining defendants are Prisca Joseph and Scott Fitchett.

Joseph allegedly colluded "with clinic escorts in an effort to get close to patients as they approach the clinic," according to the suit. Fitchett was accused of standing outside the clinic chanting "murderer, murderer" at approaching individuals and filming patients.

Lawyers for members of Church at the Rock contend that their clients were exercising their right to assemble and were offering women options outside of abortion.

"Members of the Church at the Rock peacefully coun-

sel women who are considering having an abortion," said Andrew Bath, of the Thomas More Society General Counsel. "They conduct themselves reasonably and compassionately, and offer information about abortion alternatives to those willing to listen. This is the exercise of their core First Amendment rights, and is an activity that takes place on the public sidewalk, the traditional venue for expression concerning important ideas and societal issues."

Choices Women's Medical Center provides gynecological, reproductive and behavioral health services. It was one of the first clinics in New York City to provide abortions since it was legalized in New York state in the 1970s, according to the center's founder, Merle Hoffman.

"I am still here because I made a vow to my first patient and to myself—that I would always be there for women and girls who came to me for services," said Hoffman. "I stand with A.G. Schneiderman and his staff—and with all abortion providers and patients—to say that this injustice must stop."

QUEENS WEEKLY, FEB. 25, 2018

Pols call on feds to fix railroad crossing signals

BY MARK HALLUM

A pair of Queens congresswomen called on the Federal Railroad Administration to address a crossing in Maspeth, which it was reported to them has not been signaling to motorists when train traffic comes through.

Christina Wilkerson, president of the Citizens for a Better Maspeth, was near the area on Feb. 11 when she saw a train move through the crossing at 56th Street and Flushing Avenue without the signals being activated or railroad personnel controlling traffic.

U.S. Rep. Grace Meng (D-Flushing) and her colleague in Congress, Nydia

Velázquez (D-Brooklyn), wrote a letter to the FRA to have the issue resolved since the crossing lacks gates, stating motorist and pedestrian safety depends on working signals.

"The Federal Railroad Administration must immediately send an inspector to investigate the highway-rail crossings in Maspeth after this dangerous incident," Meng said. "There is a history of crossing gate and signal malfunctions in the Maspeth community, and the FRA must investigate these issues with all due haste. I thank Councilman Robert Holden for bringing this incident to my attention and Congresswoman Velázquez for joining me in



The Federal Railroad Administration is looking into traffic signal issues at a Maspeth crossing.

this effort."

The two said this issue follows other malfunctioning railroad crossing sig-

nals at Maspeth Avenue and Rust Street just blocks away.

"It's deeply concern-

ing that a train would go through this intersection without any crossing signals activating, leaving no warning for pedestrians or motorists," Velázquez said. "Maspeth is a significant hub for rail traffic and we need to ensure that the Federal Railroad Administration carefully examines all the rail crossings in this community, before an accident occurs, so residents can feel safe walking about or driving in their own neighborhood."

Wilkerson reported the issue to newly elected Councilman Robert Holden (D-Middle Village), who passed the word along to the congressional members.

"The Federal Railroad

Administration (FRA) dispatch a signal and train control inspector to investigate the matter and respond directly to the members of Congress," spokeswoman Desiree French said.

In July 2015, a locomotive operated by the New York Atlantic Railroad clipped an 18-wheeler and at the Maspeth Avenue crossing, injuring the driver of the truck who narrowly escaped his vehicle as it went up in flames and resulted in a federal probe which found the train operator was at fault.

Reach reporter Mark Hallum by e-mail at mhallum@cnglocal.com or by phone at (718) 260-4564.



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and residents on what they believe this parcel of land should be," Nolan said. "This is public property and any plans, now more than ever, should include ideas and alternatives that come directly from local residents."

The 1.5 million-square-foot mixed use project on the north side of Anable Basin, on 44th Drive near Vernon Boulevard would include a 600-seat school, 100,000 square feet of light industrial space, 400,000 square feet of commercial office space and 25,000 square feet of art space.

"We're proud that this will deliver hundreds of affordable homes, new industrial and commercial space, workforce training programs, good jobs, a new 600-seat school and more than an acre of open space for Long Island City," the city's Economic Development Corporation spokeswoman, Shavone Williams, said. "We look forward to continued discussions with commu-



Community opposition is growing in Long Island City over the city's plan to build a massive 1,000 unit residential development just north of Anable Basin.

nity members in the months ahead, as we look for ideas on how to make this great project even better."

To garner Van Bramer's support in what he calls the largest rezoning in his eight years in the City Council, he will need to see changes to the plan.

"We have a crisis with not enough schools and I don't want to contribute to this overdevelopment in Long Island City without the infrastructure that is needed for the people who are already here," Van Bramer said. "Schools, a community center, parkland, transportation,

this is all part of infrastructure and good city planning would have called for this long ago and instead we're playing catchup. We've got to demand more from Mayor de Blasio, the EDC and from the Office of City Planning. We've got to demand more from all of them."

That is why Van Bramer will join Nolan in support of a March 3 rally organized by the LIC Coalition, a grassroots civic organization that is dissatisfied with the way open space has been used as the unprecedented development of the neighborhood continues unabated.

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dolph Hess in the building's directory.

The Commission launched an investigation into discrimination at the condo after several tenants and unit owners reported that Milano was harassing tenants on their immigration status, national origin, and race, as well as creating a generally hostile environment.

"This kind of behavior is disgusting and unacceptable. People were terrified," Van Bramer said. "As soon as we saw what was happening, we alerted the commission, who acted swiftly. No person in New York City should feel threatened or be harassed and discriminated against based on where they were born, how they pray, or who they love — especially in their own homes. I am happy to see this resolved and to know that the residents will no longer have to live in fear, and can feel safe in our own community."

The settlement required Milano and two other mem-

bers from the board to step down and remove "all offensive posters, symbols and materials from the lobby. The condo unit owners elected five new board members last Thursday.

"We hope this settlement sends a strong message to housing providers citywide that New York City does not tolerate discrimination and harassment and that we will not hesitate to take immediate action when we learn of violations," Assistant Commissioner for the Law Enforcement Bureau at the NYC Commission on Human Rights Sapna V. Raj said. "Housing providers, including condo boards, supers, landlords, and brokers have a legal obligation to follow the NYC Human Rights Law, which prohibits discrimination and harassment based on national origin, immigration status, race or any other protected category. We encourage anyone who is experiencing discrimination or harassment to report it to the commission by calling 718-722-3131."

During its investigation,

one tenant told the commission that Milano stopped her as she was walking to her apartment with her boyfriend, who is of Puerto Rican descent, demanding to see his passport and exclaiming that he "could be anyone illegal." Another unit owner said that Milano left her a voicemail claiming to be Adolf Hitler and stating that "the grandmaster of the KKK is coming to the lobby."

The same unit owner said that Milano also responded to her attempt to rent her apartment to a Latina woman by declaring, "She's Spanish. They are low lifes and don't pay the rent." The condo board remains under investigation by New York's Attorney General Eric Schneiderman.

"We are encouraged by the actions taken tonight by the NYC Commission on Human Rights with whom we have been working closely on this investigation," Schneiderman said. "Our investigation into potential state civil rights violations and financial misconduct at the condominium continues."



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Tree concerns in Bayside

Avella survey shows residents unhappy with timber conditions

BY GINA MARTINEZ

Bayside residents are concerned about the condition of city trees in their community, a new survey shows.

State Sen. Tony Avella (D-Bayside) announced the results of a constituent survey regarding residents' feelings on the condition of city trees in front of their homes. Last month, Avella's office surveyed 1,250 homeowners in his district, asking them to evaluate the condition of city trees in front of their property or on their block. According to Avella, the results showed an overwhelming concern on the part of residents for the safety of their families and homes because of the condition of a tree near their home.

The survey revealed that two-thirds of respondents said they felt unsafe due to the condition of the trees in front of their home, which Avella has called "unacceptable." The survey also showed that three-quarters of respondents think their trees are either overgrown, dangerous or need to be removed.

Avella has been vocal for years in the fight to reform the way the city addresses tree issues across all boroughs. He has also



State Sen. Tony Avella goes over the results of his tree survey.
Courtesy of Tony Avella

written legislation in the state Legislature that would seek to establish a task force to evaluate the Parks Department's policies on tree maintenance.

Avella said one of the more disheartening results of the survey found 71 percent of residents were completely unaware of the city's "Tree and Sidewalk Repair Program." The program, which comes at no cost to homeowners, shifts the burden of responsibility for damaged sidewalks

due to city tree roots back to the city for repairs. Two-thirds of respondents said that even though a city tree has damaged their sidewalk, less than 30 percent even knew of the program's existence, according to Avella.

He said the city has to do a better job of informing homeowners of the free services available to them to remedy tree issues.

"For a long time, I have felt that the city of New York and DPR have

inadequately addressed the concerns of residents who had issues with a tree in front of their property," he said. "Because of this survey, I now have the numbers to prove that what I have feared is actually true. Residents have legitimate safety concerns due to a failed job by our city to maintain trees."

Avella said the results of the survey clearly show that the city needs to do a better job of addressing residents' requests for tree pruning and removals. According to the survey, 69 percent of residents said that their trees were not satisfactorily pruned.

"It is clear as day that residents are not being listened to, and are certainly not having their concerns taken seriously by this administration," he said. "This is absolutely unacceptable and clearly it isn't just me who feels this way. We need the city to fix their approach to these basic quality-of-life issues so that we can live without the fear of a strong wind being able to knock a tree onto our homes," added Avella.

Reach Gina Martinez by e-mail at gmartinez@cnglocal.com or by phone at (718) 260-4566.

Two sentenced in 2015 Whitestone slashing

BY MARK HALLUM

Two men were sentenced to "lengthy" prison terms after pleading guilty to slashing a teenage girl's face in Whitestone as she walked to school in 2015, according to the Queens DA.

Queens District Attorney Richard Brown called the "heinous attack" something that would affect the Chinese exchange student's life forever and was vocal in his praise of the nearly two decade-long sentences the two men received Feb. 14.

Wilson Lai, 26, of Oakland Gardens, admitted in January to hiring Pennsylvania resident Devon Berkley, 39, to attack his underage girlfriend, who lived in the same place as the victim, 16-year-old JiaJia Liang. Liang was not the intended target of the attack, but received two cuts across the face.

"Last month, the two defendants in this case pleaded guilty to brutally attacking a teenage girl," Brown said. "The victim in this case was not the intended target, but nonetheless she will have to live with the pain of the slashing for the rest of her life — as well as the permanent scars that remain visible on her face. The defendants have now been sentenced and will be incarcerated for a very long time as punishment for their crime and to protect society."

Lai received 19 years in prison while Berkley, who had to be extradited from Pennsylvania, was sentenced to 18 years, the DA said.

Liang was on her way to school when her face was abruptly slashed twice by Berkley, according to Brown, and still bears the scars. The wounds required hospitalization and up to 200 stitches, the DA said.

Liang was attending the Whitestone Academy while staying with a host family when the attack happened.

"In pleading guilty, the defendants have admitted to a heinous attack on a teenage girl," Brown said in January following the guilty plea. "The victim in this case was not the target, but nonetheless she will forever be marred by the memory of what happened to her and the scars on her face. The defendants in the case deserve to be incarcerated as punishment for their crime."

Lai was arrested in June 2016, and Berkley was later extradited from Pennsylvania.

Lt. Timothy Thompson of the 109th Precinct said at a 2016 news conference that Lai was facing multiple counts of rape, assault, criminal sex act, criminal mischief, conspiracy, acting in a manner injurious to a child, harassment and criminal possession of a weapon.

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Sandy

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to lawyers representing the plaintiffs.

The Rockaway residents and business owners lived and worked in Breezy Point, Rockaway Park and Belle Harbor and faced widespread fires that destroyed their homes and places of work during Hurricane Sandy in October 2012. They blame LIPA and National Grid for not cutting off the electrical power to the peninsula before Sandy struck, although there were forecasts of a storm surge.

"When the Rockaway Peninsula flooded due to storm surges from Hurricane Sandy, flood water came into contact with components of [the electrical system] causing short circuits, fires and, ultimately, the destruction of...property," according to the plaintiffs.

The Sandy victims will now be able to move forward with their suit,

despite efforts from LIPA to block it, according to Eric Schwarz of SPBMC, the law firm representing over 40 families and business owners who are seeking claims for damages.

"Just like Hurricane Sandy ravaged the Rockaways, LIPA's repeated attempts to block this case from moving forward has ravaged the families and businesses who simply want their day in court," said Schwarz. "Today's ruling is a step in the right direction for our clients and all those who are seeking some sort of closure on this issue so they can finally try to move on with their lives as best they can."

According to the appeal from LIPA, the company is a public authority that was created by the state Legislature in 1986 as an alternative to the Long Island Lighting Company, which had a coverage area of Long Island and the Rockaway Peninsula.

LIPA claimed in the

appeal that as a corporate municipal instrumental of the state exercising essential governmental and public powers that it has governmental function immunity.

Law.com states that the old English common law gives governmental bodies impunity from judgment and lawsuits.

"A government agency's ability to make such decisions and to prioritize their response to emergencies should be free from tort liability," according to Zachary Murdock, who is representing LIPA. "Purposely turning off power to an occupied area would have immediately knocked out the street lights, traffic lights, the power to people's homes, to hospitals, nursing homes, elevators in high-rise buildings, and basement sump pumps, among other things."

The plaintiffs, however, believe the actions of LIPA to be proprietary, according to the appeal. They are arguing that

LIPA is a private enterprise.

After LIPA took over LILCO as a subsidiary, it entered into a Management Services Agreement with National Grid, which was also operating under the presumption that LIPA was entitled to governmental immunity.

The court may have rejected LIPA's appeal, but the company maintains its stance as a public authority.

"LIPA, a New York State public authority that owns the electric transmission and distribution system for Long Island and the Rockaway Peninsula, asserted the defense of government function immunity which protects decisions and actions of governmental entities when they prepare for and respond to emergencies such as Superstorm Sandy," said Murdock. "For these reasons, government function immunity should protect LIPA's decision to not turn off power."

Lot

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inside the lot, which is conducive to a rodent infestation as well as a breeding ground for mosquitoes," Avella said at his first press conference about the lot in August 2016.

Two residences stand on either side of the site, which trucks frequently visited in the early morning, making loud noises that disrupted the otherwise quiet block, according to neighbors, who also blasted Valenza for posting "no parking" and "active driveway" signs around the property even though it lacked a curb cut and was not supposed to be used as car storage.

And after years of calling for its closure, Avella said he is very happy the buildings department locked up the lot to prevent anyone from accessing it, and criticized Valenza for dishonestly using the site at his neighbors' expense.

"I am relieved that



State Sen. Tony Avella celebrates the padlocking of an illegal Whitestone commercial lot.

Photo Courtesy of Tony Avella

after all of this disregard for the law the city of New York has finally stepped in to take action," the state senator said. "It's a disgrace how this property owner can just choose to ignore the law and bully local residents by making them believe they would be at risk of being ticketed or towed if they parked in front of this lot."

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and *The* MACALLAN® present

JOIN US EVERY THURSDAY
- 6pm to Close -

Dram & Draft

Prices include: 1 glass of beer and 1 dram of whiskey.

Macallan 12 Sherry Oak - \$11.50

Suggested beer pairing: Hofbräu Original

Macallan 12 Double Cask - \$11.50

Suggested beer pairing: Warsteiner Pilsener

Macallan 15 Fine Oak - \$17.50

Suggested beer pairing: Hofbräu Hefeweizen

Macallan 18 Sherry Oak - \$39.00

Suggested beer pairing: Hofbräu Dunkel

Dram and Draft pairings have been made by Macallan based on the complimentary character of the Drams and Beers in this menu. Follow these pairings or create your own according to your own tastes.

PLUS
Check out on our entire
new selection of whiskey!



3 Dram Flight
Macallan 12 Sherry Oak, Macallan 12
Double Cask, and Macallan 15 Fine Oak
\$33.00

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