

What's next after the Visionaries Roundtable? A call to involvement from the Chestnut Hill Conservancy

by Lori Salganicoff

Chestnut Hill is distinct in the deep connection between the built environment and neighboring natural resources. Topographically rising above the rest of the city, bordered by the Cresheim and Wissahickon Valleys, and graced with a stylistic variety of thoughtfully designed buildings, Chestnut Hill evolved to seamlessly combine the built and natural environment.

Last Friday evening, the Chestnut Hill Conservancy and Historical Society hosted more than 350 community members to a vigorous discussion of balancing preservation and development in Chestnut Hill in the wake of strong urban expansion here and throughout Philadelphia.

It is the quality of architecture, the rhythms of built and open space, and the green "fingers of the park" permeating public and private space alike that define our streetscapes. Public transportation, retail and other amenities add to our distinctive village character.

These are also the qualities that attract development – development that could enhance, or could destroy, the very qualities that bring top dollar. How do we protect Chestnut Hill's uniqueness while fostering our long-held tradition of careful, thoughtful development? Where might development make the most sense? The question of how to manage this pressure is a

matter of aesthetics, tradition, health, and economics. It is a question the Conservancy hopes to help all of us to engage in.

Chestnut Hill is unusual, not just for the significant architecture and green space we have retained, but also for the fact that WE HAVE SURVEYED AND EVALUATED most of it. Work by the Conservancy, the Chestnut Hill Community Association, Friends of the Wissahickon and others puts us ahead of every other Philadelphia neighborhood in planning our future. But, as currently zoned, the community is shockingly vulnerable to by-right changes that could greatly diminish its character.

The Roundtable and our related "Residential Conservation, Preservation, and Development Study" will ready the community to truly engage in the Philadelphia Planning Commission's Upper Northwest Philadelphia District Plan this Fall, one of the final elements of the city's Philadelphia2035 Comprehensive Plan.

The Chestnut Hill Conservancy and Historical Society has spent the last 50 years celebrating and protecting the area's significant historical, cultural and natural resources. Join us! Please visit the www.CHConservancy.org to learn how to support and remain engaged with these efforts.

Lori Salganicoff is executive director of the Chestnut Hill Conservancy and Historical Society.

Hill development, conservation

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gardens and the balance of land and not give way to need. Need alone is not enough because it is uninspired."

Kahn said his father's words still resonate today. He said any new development or change "must not destroy or distract from the great character of Chestnut Hill."

Keynote speaker Witold Rybczynski, a Hill resident and emeritus professor of urbanism at the University of Pennsylvania, told the audience that James Stirling once remarked that "architects have always looked back in order to move forward." He added that the same could be said for communities – specifically Chestnut Hill. He told the audience that all development is not bad. Chestnut Hill was once a new development.

"The iconic character of Chestnut Hill was not a natural occurrence," he said. "It was a man-made place. It began as part of urban garden city movement."

He said Henry Houston's vision of an urban garden city transformed Chestnut Hill into the historic garden district it is today. Rybczynski said for a city to remain vibrant in the future, it must have a clear understanding of its past and be willing to embrace responsible redevelopment.

Thanks to a grant from the William Penn Foundation's Watershed Protection program, the "Residential Conservation, Preservation and Development Study," will help the community identify and communicate priorities for preserving privately-owned



Richard Snowden (right) addresses the audience. To the left: David DeLong. (photo by Sue Ann Rybak)

residential property and green space in Chestnut Hill in an effort to protect the Wissahickon Watershed. The six-month study, which ends in May, is being conducted by the Chestnut Hill Community Association and the Chestnut Hill Conservancy with assistance from the Natural Lands Trust, Philadelphia University, the University of Pennsylvania and other key stakeholders.

Saffron said Philadelphia is experiencing a boom like it hasn't seen since the early 20th century, when immigrants were flooding to the city to work in factories.

"Chestnut Hill is lucky to have groups like the conservancy that can help create a masterplan to examine land use and historical resources," she said. "I think it's crucial to look at what else is going on in the city and be proactive."

She encouraged residents to not only discuss what land is available for construction, but to closely

examine zoning classifications, so there are no surprises like the 29-story building being built on historic Jeweler's Row.

"New construction can reinvigorate a community," she said. "Change isn't necessarily bad. The challenge is to control that change and make sure it happens in the best way. An increase in population is essential, in order to support businesses on the Avenue, schools, and churches. Those institutions won't be viable unless those populations are continually refreshed."

She suggested that Chestnut Hill consider becoming a conservation district because there is more flexibility in the kinds of development that can take place there. She encouraged audience members "not to be afraid of change, but to be willing to manage that change."

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from our readers

(Continued from page 4)

Cresheim Valley Road were recently repaired. How long they remain intact remains to be seen.

New construction ruining neighborhood

Sharon Reiss
Mt. Airy

[In response to letter to the editor in last week's issue by Cheryl Donahue regarding new townhome construction on West Gravers Lane]

I am horrified at the monstrous

new construction in the 100 block of Gravers Lane. This lovely street has been ruined by these houses.

I'd also like to include the gigantic townhouse recently built on Ardleigh Street where Cafette had been and the atrocious construction on East Abington Ave.

I'll also mention the unoccupied building above Fresh Market right smack in the middle of Chestnut Hill. Ms Donahue is on target requesting editorial and perhaps the Chestnut Hill Conservancy's support to prevent our unique neighborhood's destruction by greedy developers.

Helen Atkinson
Chestnut Hill

Where have all the equestrians gone?

Inspired by, the Local's front-page article, 94th Annual Wissahickon Day Sunday," I took some visiting friends to see the parade, of which I have many fond memories. I was surprised by the lack of a crowd, but still pumped about prospect of a spectacle.

When I hooted and clapped at the first pony cart rolling by the Valley Green Inn, a number of shocked fellow diners on the porch laughed out loud, which I realize was both pathetic and funny. What followed was a mere handful of equestrians without any welcome or hoopla whatsoever.

What happened to this once fine parade, this special day? Where are the Riders of the Wissahickon? Have the mountain bikers driven all of the equestrians out of the Valley? Sad.

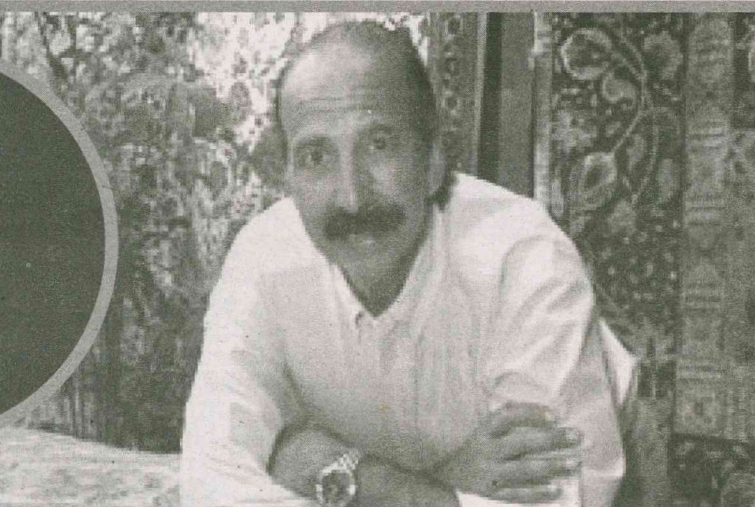
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