

Gotham Gazette - <http://www.gothamgazette.com/article/environment/20041221/7/1224>

Saving Two Birds; Saving Staten Island **by Sam Williams** **21 Dec 2004**

A little over a year ago, "Jurassic Park" author Michael Crichton delivered a speech to San Francisco's Commonwealth Club on [the similarity between environmentalism and religion](#).

"Environmentalism seems to be the religion of choice for urban atheists," said Crichton. "There's an initial Eden, a paradise, a state of grace and unity with nature, there's a fall from grace into a state of pollution as a result of eating from the tree of knowledge, and as a result of our actions, there's a judgment day coming for us all. We are all energy sinners, doomed to die, unless we seek salvation, which is called sustainability."

His words replayed in my mind during the media coverage of New York's two most famous raptors – the red-tailed hawks Pale Male and Lola, after their unceremonious eviction from a 12th floor perch at 927 Fifth Avenue.

Biologists often lump predatory birds into the category known as "charismatic macrofauna" -- animal organisms big enough to impress or awe human observers. In their decade of residence alongside Central Park, Pale Male, Lola and their offspring have been the inspiration for a documentary movie, multiple television specials and magazine articles, not to mention a book, "Red-Tails in Love."

That may explain why the removal of their nest inspired a week's worth of rallies, with nearly a hundred people gathered across the street chanting "No nest, no peace."

"Whatever Lola wants, Lola gets," read one sign.

"Honk-4-Hawks," read another.

"People want to see the nest brought back," E. J. Adams of the New York City Audubon Society politely explained to the press.

The co-op board reversed itself; Pale Male and Lola [will return](#) – demonstrating the benefits of ...not a religion... but what could be called emotional environmentalism. Before we elevate them to sacred status, however, it's important to realize that not all species have the benefit of a Manhattan address, celebrity neighbors, and a noble visage. Many, like the endangered [Torrey's Mountain Mint](#) and [the American chestnut tree](#), do their living and dying invisibly in overlooked spaces such as Charleston Woods on Staten Island.

Saving Staten Island

The history of Staten Island and the history of Staten Island real estate development are often one and the same. Since the days of Cornelius Vanderbilt, the Staten Island economy has been built on one fundamental precept: Inside every cramped city apartment is a future Staten Island homeowner yearning to breathe free.

Forty years after the construction of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, however, many local groups are starting to question the wisdom of that notion. A hot real estate market coupled with a [loophole-riddled building code](#) have led to hasty, ill-conceived developments on an island already known for its crazy-quilt approach to neighborhood planning. But resistance has been

piecemeal as well: "There's so many things going on on Staten Island that everybody is so busy taking care of their own little piece of turf," says Dennis Conwell, a Dongan Hills activist.

Lately, however, island environmental groups have been finding places to dig in. For the last 12 weeks, Kryscherille, a neighborhood just north of the Outerbridge Crossing, has been the scene of candlelight vigils as local environmental groups protest the potential construction of the island's third Home Depot store on 130 acres of city-owned woodland known as Charleston Woods. Event co-organizer David Burg of [WildMetro](#) says the protest was the only recourse after a failed legal attempt to block the sale to the Blumenfeld Development Group, a Syosset-based company that a 1999 New York Public Interest Research Group report ranked as the top-spending lobbyist in New York City.

Burg admits that turnout for the Sunday vigils has been slight -- most attract fewer than 12 participants -- and the media coverage negligible. Still, in giving activists a place to gather and vent their feelings, the group has managed to turn a local defeat into a victory of sorts. On November 17, delegates from 15 island groups convened for an island-wide "summit" on open space issues. Attendees pledged mutual support on everything from low-level single-lot disputes to large-scale projects such as the recently proposed Nascar racetrack in the wetlands region just below the Goethals Bridge. To sum up the "join or die" spirit of the gathering, delegates ambitiously titled their alliance the Coalition to Save Staten Island.

"The feeling is that there's just too much for existing groups to take on individually," Burg says. "It's now or never."

Most official remedies to the threat of overdevelopment involved changing "the width of streets or the number of curbs," said Shirlee Marraccini, a resident of Great Kills and president of [Turnaround Friends](#), a non-profit dedicated to converting abandoned or underutilized properties into community parkland. Such remedies do little to prevent the subdivision of existing city-owned or privately-owned lots currently regarded by most Staten Islanders as open space.

If recent behavior is any indication, island politicians are already sensing a shift in community sentiment, and responding accordingly; area representatives, for example, oppose development of the Charleston Woods site.

"Before we use the Charleston site for stores, we should put it to public use," writes Councilmember Andrew Lanza on [Gotham Gazette](#). "The infrastructure of Staten Island has lagged behind development. We have overcrowded schools, we do not have enough parkland, and we do not have a single recreational ballfield on the South Shore."

For Conwell of Dongan Hills, political support is crucial but not as crucial as a coalition. Development is a many-headed opponent, he believes; without cross-island coordination, each local victory is outweighed by multiple losses.

"It's so hard to see information in the city," Conwell said. "Between tracking the auctions, trying to keep track of what the building is department doing, what the [Department of Environmental Protection] is doing, you also have to throw in the dimension of what our friends in Albany and Washington D.C. are doing. Everybody's got a little slice of responsibility, which adds to the confusion. Most of the time I've just seen things by watching the Internet."

Burg says even the limited pressure over the Home Depot development has scored results. Earlier this month, he says, attorneys from the Blumenfeld Development Group contacted WildMetro to set up a discussion on how to mitigate the project's environmental impact. Representatives from the company did not return calls requesting comment, but the company has a similar Home Depot/Costco project in East Harlem facing even more community pressure.

The group is also talking with the city about preserving a 30-acre remainder of the Staten Island site as open woodland space.

While not exactly victories, such talks have done much to slow the *fait accompli* nature of local developmental politics. When coalition members gather in January, Marraccini hopes the group can come up with a few more places worthy of collective action.

"I sincerely believe that the Kryscher Hill-Charleston Wood project was the beginning of something," she says. "With all the natural areas going away, we really need to have one united voice. Hopefully, we will have some impact not just on one project but on all of them." The result won't restore us to Eden, but the members of the coalition hope that Staten Island, at least, will be saved.

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