

The Piermont Newsletter

VOLUME XXXXIII NO. 3

PUBLISHED BY THE PIERMONT CIVIC ASSOCIATION

WINTER 2013

The Piermont Marsh—Where We Are In November, 2013

Piermont received a letter from Betsy Blair, head of the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), on November 1st that had good news for residents who oppose the use of herbicides for the large-scale eradication of Phragmites in the Piermont Marsh.

The letter said that the DEC "...has changed course after hearing from many of you who expressed concerns about two of the initial concepts for the marsh that were in the bridge permit. The first was the removal of 200 acres of the invasive reed Phragmites. Strong objection to the anticipated use of herbicides, as well as recognition of the valuable role played by Phragmites in reducing wave energy during storms, caused us to reconsider the scale and approach of this treatment."

And, "Importantly, where we decide to restore portions of the marsh's historic salt meadows, we have committed to exploring alternative methods to the use of herbicides for controlling Phragmites at Piermont Marsh."

The letter went on to say that the DEC has "...changed course on doing a study of the feasibility of removing parts of the landfill at the north end of the marsh" to try to restore lost marsh habitats at that location."

Older Piermonters know better than to tinker with this century-long dumping ground, now capped by earth, sediment, trees and plants. "If ever there was a sleeping dog that should be left to lie, this was it," said one long-time resident.

However, all of the good news is tempered by some uncertainty. "They have clearly left some wiggle room regarding use of herbicides," commented Piermont Mayor, Chris Sanders. A DEC spokesman confirmed this when asked by Journal News reporter Mike Riisiiniit.

The Piermont Marsh Alliance, credited by many as the agent of this turn-around by the DEC, followed-up the DEC's announcement by sending Betsy Blair copies of petitions containing over 600 hand-collected local signatures opposing



Piermont Marsh in all its winter beauty. Photo: Sally Savage

the eradication of Phragmites. "Just a reminder, as they put together a new proposal for the Marsh", said PMA spokesperson Marthe Schulwolf.

During the late summer, a second local group concerned about the future of the Marsh was formed – The Piermont Marsh Conservancy. The Conservancy has been highlighting on its Facebook page much about the history of the Marsh; it advocates in favor of eradication of Phragmites and applauds attempts to return the Marsh to an earlier, more plant-diverse period in history.

The Conservancy has not joined the Alliance's stand against the use of herbicide, and has posted a number of additional methods that have been used in other locations to eradicate Phragmites ecosystems, such as mowing, use

of grazing animals, black plastic sheeting etc. Perhaps some of these techniques will be incorporated by the DEC in its plan for the Piermont Marsh.

It could be said that there exists a "Good Phrag" "Bad Phrag" division in local thinking at this point. The "Bad Phrag" position is that Phragmites is becoming a monoculture in the Marsh, and that it has overwhelmed other native, older species of plants via virulent means (e.g., emitting toxins through their roots), and that it does not support other forms of life (fish, birds and mammals)." Bad Phrag" claims that Phragmites is a fire hazard, although the last major marsh fire took place decades ago when the Marsh was largely salt hay.

"Good Phrag" says don't kill the one species that has successfully adapted to the polluted conditions we have created, and is home to an eco-system of plants, birds and fish and animals that should not be destroyed by an experiment in bio-diversity. "Good Phrag" views Phragmites as a critical defense against the force of storm surges on Piermont's southern border thanks to its height and density, and points

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President's Corner



The Piermont Marsh Alliance, led by Marthe Schulwolf and its many members, has forced the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) to reconsider its plans. Make no mistake. The original plans threatened to destroy our precious wetlands and much of its wildlife. It is time to thank the Alliance for its work.

That's just what Taffy Williams did in her November 9 letter to The Journal News: "It's good to learn of the [group's] efforts," she wrote, "to protect the important swath of marshland from the toxic chemical application of herbicides!"

"Phragmites, while 'invasive,' have become part of the landscape and are now integrated as a critical component of the natural buffering system that intermediate wetlands provide," explained Ms. Williams, who is a DEC wildlife rehabilitator.

"The state, i.e., DEC and USDA, are both notorious for inflicting harm on the environment, including spraying to destroy foliage and slaughtering birds and other wildlife, without public knowledge or input, despite the impact to the public.

"Happily, in this case, nothing has been harmed because of the alertness of these community members. The [Alliance's] actions serve to remind us all to be on high alert and scrutinize projects when the DEC, FWS or USDA plans to undertake 'environmental controls' in our respective areas," Ms Williams concluded,

Her letter should shatter any illusions you might still be clinging to about the DEC's secret plan for our Piermont Marsh. Yes, it was a secret and it never was benign. We'd heard that money from the bridge was to pay for the marsh "restoration" program. If we hadn't questioned Brian Conybeare about it last summer during a Piermont Civic Association information meeting about the new Tappan Zee Bridge, it might still be a secret.

Conybeare is the Governor's point man on the new bridge. He was baffled when we asked about plans for our marsh. He didn't know there were any plans. In fact, he'd never before heard the word Phragmites. That was amazing. Conybeare is, as he should be, a bridge Savant, a walking, talking encyclopedia of all things TZB. The DEC had kept

him in the dark too. It hadn't mentioned its plans to Mayor Sanders or the Piermont Village Board either.

All that changed on November 1 when the DEC yielded. Writing to "Mayor Sanders and Interested Others," Betsy Blair, the agency's Marine Habitat Manager, promised: "A Piermont Marsh habitat enhancement plan will be developed ... in a collaborative effort with the community and other interested parties. We seek your involvement and ideas to make this plan a success.

"Please note," she continued, "that we have changed course after hearing from many of you who expressed concerns about two of the initial concepts for the marsh that were in the bridge permit. ... Strong objection to the anticipated use of herbicides, as well as recognition of the valuable role played by Phragmites in reducing wave energy during storms, caused us to reconsider the scale and approach of this treatment."

These days, when so many feel crushed by government, it cheers us to know that you can persuade a secretive and stubborn state bureaucracy to change course. Wow!

~Bob Samuels

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The Newsletter is published three times a year by the Piermont Civic Association, Box 454, Piermont, NY 10968

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This issue of *The Piermont Newsletter*, and many past issues, can be found online at <http://www.piermont-ny.com/newsletter/> thanks to volunteer Richie Stark.

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Fire Chief Bill Cavanaugh Breaks The Mold



Fire Chief Bill Cavanaugh. Photo: Fred Burrell

Some things never change here – the Hudson River and Sparkill Creek flow by, our pier juts out into the river, the sun rises from the Westchester hills and a native-born Piermonter (like a Goswick, a Fagan or a Lynch) heads the fire department. That's our landscape.

For as long as anyone can remember, it's been this way. But this April, unbeknownst to most Piermonters, our all-volunteer Empire Hose Company changed the landscape. It chose Bill Cavanaugh, a lifelong Bronxite, as its new chief. Not only is the 50-year-old Cavanaugh not a native, but he is a relative newcomer. He and his family moved here from Riverdale in 2005.

Soon after that, Bill retired from the New York City Fire Department. He had put in 20 years with the city, the first couple as a cop. He spent the rest of his time with a fire company in the Bronx. That's where he was on September 11, 2001, when the planes hit the World Trade Center. Dispatchers assigned his company to back up duty, sending it from fire station to fire station. "We started in Harlem, worked our way to midtown and eventually down to Duane Street in lower Manhattan," Bill remembers. The next day he reported for work at that dangerous, smoking mountain of wreckage called The Pile. He was there for 32 days.

A few weeks after the Cavanaugh family settled into their Piermont home on Liberty Street, they saw firemen pumping

out a neighbor's flooded basement. "My son wanted to see the truck," Bill recalls, "so we walked over and I met Danny Goswick and Kevin Fagan. We started talking and I thought it would be nice to start giving back to the community where I had bought a house."

By this time, he had begun working as a laborer for Ramsey, NJ. He'd also joined its volunteer fire department. "You know, once a fireman, always a fireman," he laughs, when asked why he wanted to be in two departments.

"The amount of stuff the Piermont department is involved in surprised me," he says. "Trying to keep your game up keeps you very busy. We have an Explorer Scout program, do rescue and searches on the river, man the fire department and the ambulance — it's really multitasking."

Ambulance calls outnumber fire calls three to one. "If you are a resident of Piermont, and you need our assistance, we will take you to the hospital of your choice. We know it's our neighbors who are calling for help," Bill said. They expect to have a new ambulance early next year and a new 1,000-gallon pumper in March.

The company is seeking outside funds to replace its 27-year-old boat. "We are hoping we can get the state or the Tappan Zee Bridge to pay for it." They're talking with the bridge people about moving the boat this winter to a dock near the foot of the bridge in Grand View. Normally, in cold weather it is kept at the fireboat house at the end of the pier. He feels it would be faster to have it there. "You're racing against the clock, especially as the weather gets colder," Bill says.

The Piermont department has 54 members, 35 of them are younger and more active. Bill values them all. "If it wasn't for the older guys — the Don Cockers, the Ray Holmes — taking care of the maintenance during the day, we would really be in a lot of trouble," he declares. The department is continually looking for new members, he adds. It will train and equip them to be firefighters or emergency medical technicians (EMT's).

"As chief," he adds, "I never go off duty. You worry about membership, equipment, training and weather. Mentally it is 24/7. When I drive around town, I am constantly looking at the buildings and fire hydrants, just scoping our village out. The other officers do that too, and we stress it with our younger members."

His wife, Maggie, sometimes wishes he wasn't quite as devoted to the department. "One Easter a few years ago" Bill explains, "we had 22 people in the house when the fire whistle went off. My wife said you're not going. I had to go. Me and Danny Goswick were the only two chiefs available. We searched both sides of the river but it turned out to be an unfounded report of a person in the water."

Maggie also wasn't thrilled last year during Superstorm Sandy when Bill left her and their two children (daughter, Aishling now 12, son, Patrick, 11) to go to the firehouse. Their basement was flooded and they had no power or gas. "The house was safe," he points out. "I told her, 'You know, that's what we do for the Village. We're the fire department. We're out there to help all our neighbors.'"

~Bob Samuels



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Why Can't The Village Go Solar?



Joan Gussow's house fitted out with energy-saving and money-saving solar panels. Photo: Sally Savage

The second question most people asked me after my story on how I went solar appeared in the last issue of this newsletter (The first question was "can I do it too?") was "why can't the village go solar?" A good question that seemed worth trying to answer.

Given the realities of the village budget, it was obvious that the most attractive option would be to have photovoltaic (PV) panels installed for nothing. Could the village participate in solar leasing, a program involving no upfront costs at all and

the promise of a monthly lease payment lower than what the village was presently paying for electricity? The company that installed my system said "no"; they do residential solar only. Wider exploration did not change the answer.

The county's solar representative for Real Goods, a California-based sustainable products Company with a wonderful track record in all kinds of renewables, said that solar leasing was not an option for municipalities simply because the finance companies that are fronting the money for solar leases won't finance installations for villages; the people who could sign the lease don't actually own the properties being solarized, and may vanish at election time. When lenders pay to solarize homes, they have collateral.

So what options are there for the village to go solar? Simply paying to install PV panels on all the village streetlights which Mayor Sanders indicates make up a major portion of our electric bill—would be an option if the funds were available, which of course they are not. Moreover, we pay O & R, a flat rate per streetlight and would probably not be able to reduce that no matter what we did with them.

Last year the village received a partial grant from O & R, which enabled us to install energy efficient lighting, and motion sensor light switches in all the village facilities. Our grant-writer Sylvia Welch, was also working with the New York State Power Authority to get help in solarizing our street lights, an effort that fell through when it turned out we didn't own them. She is, however, still working with the Power Authority to study the feasibility of solar for all Village buildings and to identify other energy efficient mea-



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tures and installations that would save on utility costs.

One of the most interesting, and perhaps even doable options for getting affordable solar onto village hall and other village controlled properties is a community "solarizing" process like that begun in 2009 in Portland, Oregon. The "Solarize Portland" campaign, was a grass-roots community wide effort designed to increase access to solar energy by reducing the financial barrier for participants. High volume group purchasing was utilized to drive down the cost.

Since then, more than two dozen communities across the nation—and, in 2011, four additional communities in the state of Massachusetts, targeted by governor Deval Patrick's statewide Solarize Mass initiative, have adopted the "solarize" approach—with great success. In the four Massachusetts communities, a total of 29 solar PV projects prior to the Solarize launch was quintupled in four months by 162 new projects. While there is no such initiative

in New York State, Real Goods' Luke Kopyar told me that installed PV solar in the state in 2013 is four times what it was in 2011.

And what does all this have to do with the village government going solar—free? Kopyar said that if we undertook a "Solarize Piermont" project, his company could provide free solar panels to the village after a certain number of people signed up for household solar—at a ratio of about 20 to 1. Such an undertaking would need a team of folks including solar PV installers, and ordinary Piermont citizens to undertake a coordinated campaign aimed at encouraging homeowners and businesses to invest in going solar. If enough of us bought in, the village government could go solar, free. The question is whether or not there is enough interest in and funds available among our residents to try and make it happen.

~Joan Gussow



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RECOVERY!

Editor's Note: After Superstorm Sandy struck Piermont on October 29, 2012, many residents and photographer Sally Savage captured images of a devastated Piermont. Sally returned a year later to take new pictures of the most damaged sections. What she found was a Piermont that was strongly recovering.



Photo: Sally Savage



Photos: Sally Savage



Photo: Sally Savage



Photo: Sheriff's Department



Photo: Donna Riley



Photo: Sally Savage



Photo: Sally Savage



Photo: Denise Kronstadt



Photo: Sheriff's Department

Another Weedy Year For Piermont Gardeners

This was another weedy year. Weeds are amazingly adaptable and have many ways of successfully competing with our vegetables and flowers for the necessary resources of soil, water, food, light and air. Of particular note this year was monster sized crab grass and lots more spurge. But are all weeds equal? Read on for Part 1 of how to evaluate weeds and come up with a weeding plan. Of course the weeds change over time so you may need to have a few plans depending on what seem to be the worst weeds any given year, but this article should help you be able to think things through. And in case you are not already a weeding convert, I'll start with the true story of my own pro-weeding conversion.

Many years ago, when I first joined the Community Garden in Piermont, I was not that keen on weeding. On a basic and obvious level I understood that the weeds were competing with my crop plants for water, soil, nutrients, light and air, but I still wasn't that motivated to weed. How bad could weeds really be? How bad could they really get? Then one year I had some little mugwort plants sprout up. I decided to leave them and weed them out later in the season. After all, mugwort is an important medicinal herb. My "lesson learned" moment came later that season when I went to weed out the now large and spreading mugwort. The roots had grown deep and spread far and wide; they had grown under the raised bed boards and under the aisle outside of my garden bed. I knew since childhood that plants in the mint family were garden pests that spread by root runners, but I hadn't realized, until that moment that mugwort spread by root runners too. I had to dig huge holes inside and outside my garden bed to dig out all the roots. It was a

nightmare. Yet if I didn't do it, I'd be plagued with a forest of mugwort into the foreseeable future, and eventually, my garden neighbors would be too.

I became a pro-weeding convert. I even learned to love it. So.... are all weeds awful? If not, what separates the so-so weeds from the awful weeds, and what are the absolute worst weeds? It may seem like there should be simple and definitive answers here. But, like many things in nature, the answers are complex. There are so many weeds, and so many opinions about what the worst ones are, that I won't make a definitive list. Instead, I'll explain how you can think about and evaluate weeds in order to come up with your own list. I'll include some examples, but if your most hated weed is not mentioned, don't feel slighted. Plus, sometimes one gardener's worst weed is another gardener's favorite edible plant. As usual, trustworthy internet sites, the cooperative extension and the library are great for more info and lists if you're so inclined.

Suggestions on how to evaluate weeds:

On the negative side, there are four main areas I consider when judging how bad a weed is. Roots: I consider whether a plant can spread via root runners and/or root cuttings.

Seeds: I consider how hardy the seeds are, how quickly the plant goes to seed, how the seeds spread and how easy it is to dead head the plant.

Growth Habit: Does the plant outcompete other plants, does it hog water from young shoots, does it shade other plants with huge leaves, does it vine and choke other plants.

Plant Chemistry: I consider whether the plant is allelopathic, meaning, is it a plant that produces and exudes chemicals that inhibit the growth of, or even prevent the growth of, other plants. Toxicity to people and animals are also considered and evaluated in the plant chemistry category. I also consider how many of the above categories any plant fits into since it's often more than one!

On the positive side, I consider whether there are any mitigating factors, like whether or not the plant has any beneficial purposes; is it edible or medicinal, does it produce good green matter for compost or bring nutrients up from the depths of the soil? Do the pluses outweigh the minuses? As you can see, there is a lot to consider. Next newsletter I'll give you examples of weeds in each category.

~Susan Freiman

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From The Library

Our annual Open House is fast approaching, so mark your calendars now for the Gift of Art Show and Sale reception on Sunday, December 8, from 2-4 p.m. The theme of this year's show is A Postcard from Piermont. Local artists have been encouraged to create a small and affordable work based on their own interpretation of the theme, something that could be perfect to consider for a holiday gift. The artists donate a percentage of all sales to help support the library's programs, so in giving a gift of art, you are giving a gift to the entire community as well. The reception coincides with the village-wide holiday festival, so we anticipate a great turnout. Lovely live music performed by the Heyhoe Woods Quartet will add to the festivities, and delicious hors d'oeuvres and wines from local sources will be served. Make sure to drop by to share the holiday cheer!

This fall, various media reported on the new BiblioTech in Texas – a 4,000 square foot (about the same size as our library) public library that has opened without a single book. It's an all-digital library, boasting about 10,000 e-books and a physical space that offers 600 e-readers and 48 computer stations, as well as computer classes and story-time programs for children. Is this the wave of the future? And how do other small libraries respond to the trend? One library expert predicted that 10-20 percent of libraries could go digital in the next decade, while many others don't believe that the actual book will ever go out of style. The picture is clouded a bit because of budgetary issues as well. The new e-books are

expensive and many e-publishers have been reluctant to sell to libraries fearing a negative impact on their bottom line. That is changing, but availability is still limited by controls on the number of times any given title can circulate. So don't expect your library to become all-digital any time in the near future.


However, we are entering into the digital world at a reasonable pace, and now have two e-readers that you can check out. They are loaded with a selection of bestselling books and do not permit downloading of other titles. We also provide access through the Ramapo Catskill Library System (RCLS) to a variety of e-books. To receive e-books through RCLS you need a computer or other device with Internet access, and a card from any RCLS library. In addition, you might need some free software for your device. To explore what's available, go to our website: www.piermontlibrary.org and select "Digital Downloads." At the bottom of the page you will find a link to OverDrive help, which can assist you with more information.

Announcements of upcoming programs and events are now available through special e-mail lists that you can join from the library's website. When on the home page, select "services" and then "mailing list subscriptions" to see what's available. To get mailings about all events, select "general announcements."

While visiting the website, please help the library evaluate our service to the community and plan for the future by filing out a survey available there. The survey is also available in paper form at the circulation desk.

The library is open Monday through Thursday from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m., Friday from 12 noon to 5 p.m., and Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. For more information, please call 845-359-4595.

~Grace Mitchell




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The Front Line

Tom Temple, Supervisor of the Piermont Department of Public Works (DPW), said that with winter around the corner "we would like to remind village residents not to throw snow into the roadway when clearing it from their driveways and sidewalks. Snow thrown back into the street after the DPW has cleared the road could refreeze and cause accidents for both motorist and pedestrians. Also, if you have a fire hydrant on your property, you can assist the Fire Department by clearing any snow from around the front and sides of it."

The Supervisor said after the holidays the DPW collect Christmas trees on Tuesday January 7th and on Wednesday January 22nd as part of the village's tree recycling program. Please remove all lighting and deco-

rations from the trees before placing them out for collection.

The Piermont Police remind village residents to check their cars and other vehicles in November before the winter driving season arrives. Make sure you have adequate levels of anti-freeze in the car, that your snow tires have proper air pressure, and that you are prepared with a snow shovel, flashlight and other necessities in case you get stuck.

The Piermont Fire Department is constantly looking for new members to join its ranks. Anyone who is interested in joining the Department should come to the firehouse on any Monday evening between 7-9 pm.

~Ron Derven

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The Piermont Marsh continued from page 1

out that it is very good at filtering pollutants, which is why it is the plant of choice in wetlands created to treat wastewater.

Those interested in the Marsh will have an opportunity to hear these issues fleshed out. In their Nov. 1st letter the DEC said it envisions a 3-phased planning process, beginning this fall that they promise will be inclusive and science-based. The first phase is gathering information about what we collectively know about the marsh, how it has changed over time, and its benefits to the community and Hudson River Estuary.

The Second phase is to develop goals for the marsh that factor in its benefits. The Third phase will be to identify actions they will take to preserve and enhance the Marsh. They plan to organize a workshop in early 2014 followed by a series of working meetings to advance planning after this workshop.

What it comes down to is this: There is still a "Marsh Restoration" project coming our way. Its size, scope and method remain an unknown.

~Margaret Grace



Red Boats, Argenteuil by Claude Monet, used with permission

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ELISA UNG - THE RECORD, Jan. 2012



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