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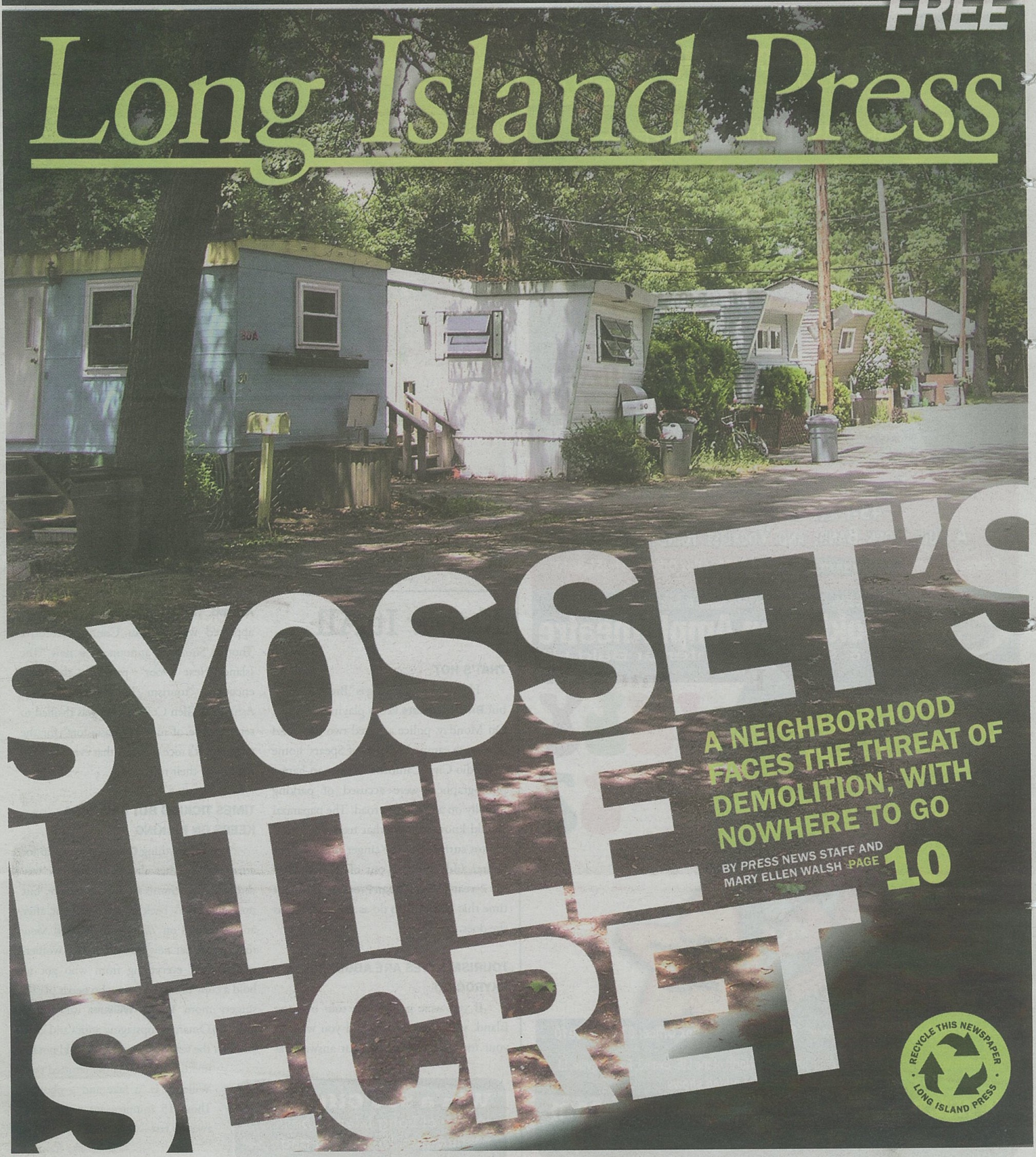

SYOSSET'S LITTLE SECRET

A NEIGHBORHOOD FACES THE THREAT OF DEMOLITION, WITH NOWHERE TO GO

BY PRESS NEWS STAFF AND MARY ELLEN WALSH PAGE 10

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Check Out Our Expanded **Restaurant Row** Dining Section STARTING ON PAGE 31

SYOSSET'S LITTLE SECRET

A NEIGHBORHOOD FACES THE THREAT OF DEMOLITION, WITH NOWHERE TO GO

BY PRESS NEWS STAFF AND MARY ELLEN WALSH

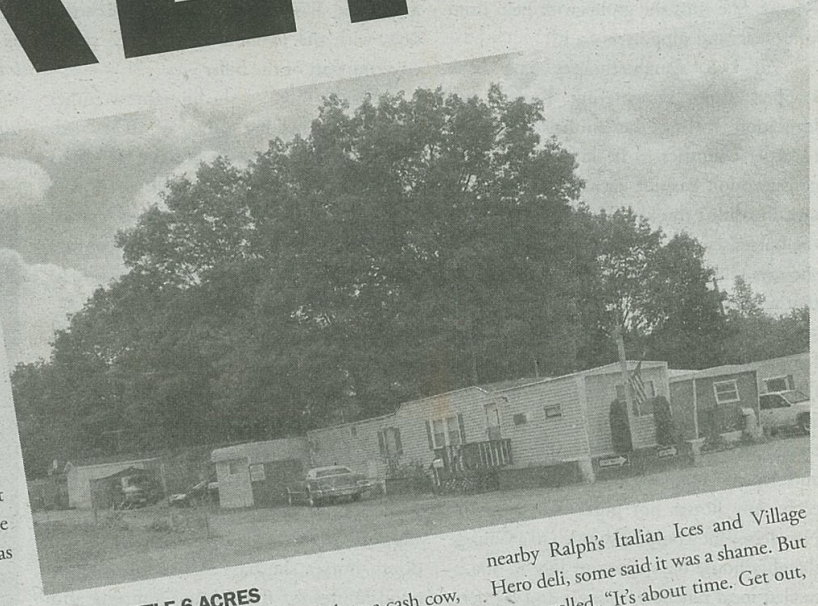
In the morning, Marcy Rappaport, a 41-year-old single mother, gets ready for work at AHRC Nassau, where she is employed as a service coordinator for mentally challenged adults. It's the heart of summer, and it's already warming outdoors, but her home has central air. Rappaport, a former teacher, and her 8-year-old son, Josh, sit at the kitchen table while the ceiling fan whirls the cooled air up to the vaulted 9-foot ceilings. Her 840-square-foot two-bedroom home has a modern look. The newly renovated kitchen with its granite counters and new Magic Chef appliances help add to the updated feel. Josh's 29-gallon freshwater tank seems a refreshing respite from the impending heat outside. Outside her window, two boys ride bikes from their homes a few very-close doors down the street. Rappaport lets Josh go outside and play and doesn't have to worry. It's safe here.

Rappaport is one of approximately 100 residents of some 60 homes at the Syosset Mobile Home Park (SMHP), a small community on a commercial row of Jericho Turnpike. The trailers, often no more than 10 feet apart, are mostly owned by those living here, but there are some renters. Rappaport has lived here for three years, after leaving her prior home, the main floor of a Bethpage house which she rented for $1,600 a month. As soon as she entered the park for the first time, driving past the park's wooden fence, she knew she had found an oasis, and in the middle of the bustling town of Syosset at that. It had all the conveniences nearby: strip malls, great restaurants, good schools and a tight-knit, old-fashioned community. She knew this was the place for her.

The $85,000 diamond in the rough was affordable. Since 2005, it's been home for her, Josh and their two cats. It was perfect. Here, she didn't have to rake leaves or shovel snow—a major benefit for a woman who says she has suffered from the degenerative effects of scoliosis for years and has prosthetic disks implanted in her neck.

Now, she worries that the perfect answer to her prayers—affordable housing close to her parents, who live in Jericho—will be wiped out. She and others wonder at the irony.

"Everyone takes advantage of us," says Barbara Pedote, 63, president of Home Owners Protecting Equity (HOPE), the SMHP's home owners association. "We're not leaving unless the Town of Oyster Bay tells us to our face that it is humane for new owner Larry Rush to kick us out of here. It's a class issue and race issue. If we were a minority, all types of civil liberty associations would be down here marching with us, plastering this all over the news. But because we are mostly white, hard-working, middle-class people, we're being ignored."



GOD'S LITTLE 6 ACRES

To some it is an eyesore, to others a cash cow, yet for residents, it is home. SMPH is a 4-acre patch of prime real estate with 2 adjacent commercial-zoned acres, nestled in the heart of Long Island's Gold Coast. Once, it was a peaceful community. But now it is embroiled in a major battle, and its very survival is at stake.

On July 16, 15 to 20 residents from the park, all members of the HOPE Association, withstood the brutal 90-plus-degree heat, lining the south side of the turnpike waving signs in protest—"Honk for Support," "Pray for Us," "Developer Says 'No' Middle Class in Syosset"—fighting to save their homes.

Trucks honked their support the loudest. When a few people stopped to ask what was going on, mostly while patronizing the popular nearby Ralph's Italian Ices and Village Hero deli, some said it was a shame. But others yelled, "It's about time. Get out, white trash," and moved on.

HOPE was protesting the action of new landlord STP Associates, LLC, the Syosset firm that bought the light industrial-zoned property in April 2007 for $9.4 million. Hoping to develop the property, STP started sending out eviction notices to residents on June 16, 2007. STP agreed to a settlement that gave the residents extra time to leave. But more time—six months instead of the 30 days initially allowed—is the least of the residents' demands. What they want the most: to keep their homes.

Residents were also angry at the increase that saw their $500 to $600 monthly payments—for the land, taxes, water, sewage, et al—go up to $750 to $1,000. In protest, some residents withheld rent, but a March ruling by a state Supreme Court judge in Nassau allowed STP's evictions of residents who did not pay.

That's a lot of commotion for a tiny community that many observers of the recent demonstration didn't even know existed. Not only didn't they know that affluent Syosset was home to a mobile home park, but they were also unaware that SMHP is the only mobile home park in Nassau County. And many may not realize that while most mobile home residents take pride in owning their dwellings, owning the land is not part of the deal.

LIFE IS A PARK

The park consists of 60 homes; 44 are occupied. Some trailers on the two main streets look a bit run down, but almost all have personal touches, showing pride among the residents. A peaceful feeling pervades. Some of the multicolored dwellings have small white picket fences, many have decks, and are often festooned with colorful flowers and plants. It's a patchwork of sorts, as new trailers were added and built on to as the community grew.

Of the 100 or so residents, 38 are active members of HOPE. Five non-HOPE residents have moved out or are paying more ($750 per month) to STP's Rush. Four structures are larger permanent cottages, with three (structure and land) occupied by STP Associates.

"IF WE WERE A MINORITY, ALL TYPES OF CIVIL LIBERTY ASSOCIATIONS WOULD BE DOWN HERE MARCHING WITH US, PLASTERING THIS ALL OVER THE NEWS. BUT BECAUSE WE ARE MOSTLY WHITE, HARD-WORKING, MIDDLE-CLASS PEOPLE, WE'RE BEING IGNORED."

—BARBARA PEDOTE, PRESIDENT, HOME OWNERS PROTECTING EQUITY (HOPE)

Everyone living at the park is affected by the new owner's policies, from families with young children to the elderly. Three Syosset High School students, four students at South Woods Middle School and seven at Robbins Lane Elementary School say that since the controversy, they are not being accepted by kids from the overwhelmingly affluent surrounding neighborhoods.

It is a very tight-knit community, says HOPE's Pedote ("No one would ever go without a meal here"), and is comprised of single parents, young families, senior citizens and veterans. She tells of one family, a father with two young autistic children. When the kids came to visit during the

PROTESTING THEIR EVICTION: (TOP) ALEXANDRA KOSTOS, 81 YEARS OLD, HAS LIVED IN THE PARK FOR 32 YEARS AND SAYS SHE WOULD HAVE NOWHERE TO GO IF EVICTED. (BOTTOM) BARBARA PEDOTE, HOME OWNER ASSOCIATION PRESIDENT, AND TO HER RIGHT, LAURIE BOCCA, A 14-YEAR PARK RESIDENT WHO HAS BEEN TOLD BY SYOSSET RESIDENTS THAT IT WAS TIME SHE MOVED OUT.

At the recent demonstration, she carried her sign: "Pray for Us."

Where can she afford to live? Not anywhere within the highly rated Syosset school district that includes Woodbury, parts of Muttontown, Oyster Bay Cove and Jericho. Starter homes in the area begin in the high $300,000s and run upwards of $3 to $4 million. As Jay Meringoff, manager/associate broker of Century 21 Prevete in Syosset, points out, "There are rental apartments, like Woodbury's Fairhaven apartments, but they aren't priced within these residents' budgets."

Some residents, who weren't willing to fight, left on their own accord. Six homes were demolished by an outside contracting company hired by STP Associates, after the residents moved out. A few are still boarded up.

Liz Stout, former owner of a 520-square-foot manufactured home, also left when things began getting rocky with the new owners, moving to her parents' Wantagh home in time for her son to enter kindergarten. "We knew at that first meeting in spring 2007 that we were going to lose our home and decided to get out. It was best for our son," she says.

But other residents are determined to stay. Elliott Schlissel, the Lynbrook attorney for SMHP, says that most of the homes are too old to be moved, and with Suffolk's mobile home parks filled to capacity, there is no room for those homes that could be relocated. He adds that many of the home owners don't own them outright and are still paying mortgages. They will lose their homes, their entire life savings.

"I think they will chain themselves to their homes before they allow that to happen," he says.

These people live in a netherworld. It's difficult to find a map that even shows the park. But it's there, and it's been a tight, predominantly white community, where just about everyone (except the elderly residents) work: There is a healthcare provider, teacher, librarian, nurse, state worker, bus driver, police officer—even a Nassau County fire marshal lived there at one time and moved out right as the controversy began, recalls Pedote.

TRAIL OF THE TRAILERS

Why would someone want to own a home, but not the land? Affordability. A mobile home provides a unique, easier way to homeownership.

Dave Reynolds, founder of MobileHomeParkStore.com and author of numerous books including *10/20 Mobile Home Park Investment System,* explains that there are three different types of mobile home communities: stereotypical lower-income parks, family-oriented parks, and senior housing parks, like those found in Florida. SMHP is a combination of all three.

"The main reasons people buy mobile homes," Reynolds says, is the "affordability—paying approximately $25 per square foot instead of $100 to $125—and having a feeling of the town-within-a-town atmosphere."

This lifestyle provides a certain mystique. A mobile home owner is a unique blend of owner and tenant who takes a risk—buying a home without land—often living month to month with no lease. Many have no choice and seek this after a major life change such as divorce or retirement, often buying their home outright with cash and no mortgage. In some cases, it's a perfect starter home that can be financed with just a few thousand dollars down without a hefty mortgage. Some people have bought mobile homes with recreational loans (as with RVs).

Many enjoy the small-town community atmosphere. Walk down the streets of SMHP and see the colorful plantings, flourishing hostas lining compact front walkways that have customized patios, decks and awnings—like a scene from any small town. Trailer hitches, no longer functional, serves as trellises for burgeoning flowers.

Mobile homes have had a rich history and are sometimes likened to traveling bands of gypsies in horse-drawn carriages. Beginning in 1926, with Syosset in the forefront, automobiles pulled "trailer coaches" with homes hitched to the back, for camping and vacations. The trailers became mobile homes approximately 8 feet wide by 20 feet long with at least three separate sleeping areas but

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"FROM DAY ONE, WE TRIED TO BE UP FRONT WITH THE TENANTS AND LET THEM KNOW WHAT THE REALITIES WERE AND TRIED TO GIVE THEM OFFERS THAT EVEN OUTSIDE OBSERVERS SAID WERE INCREDIBLY GENEROUS. IT'S ACRIMONIOUS AT THIS POINT."

—LARRY RUSH, PARTNER, STP ASSOCIATES

A TRAILER IN THE SYOSSET MOBILE HOME PARK WAS DEMOLISHED IN FEBRUARY AFTER IT WAS ABANDONED.

no bathrooms, until 1948. The 1976 National Manufactured Housing Construction and Safety Act set construction standards, and in 1980, Congress changed the term from mobile home to manufactured home.

The Syosset park was originally Indian land. By the 1920s, the Syosset Trailer Camp was a temporary vacation site with tents and a bathhouse, with running hot water and electricity. Boy Scouts and potato farm workers camped there and during the Depression, year-round residents moved in. In 1939, renamed Oaks Trailer Park, it was billed as LI's only "exclusive trailer park" in an advertisement for lodging for World's Fair attendees. The government-sanctioned land provided World War I and World War II veterans with affordable housing, but families were sometimes refused because of no vacancies.

In 1948, owner Arthur Ragozzino wanted to add 60 units, but the tax issue complicated the request. The school district wondered how to account for the "units," and if the park's children were considered Syosset and Town of Oyster Bay residents. It was proposed that tax revenue would be paid as a lump sum gift to the school district, but the request was withdrawn.

Records conflict as to who the real owner was. Was it Ragozzino? Or was it William Scalise, whose 3-year-old daughter had died in an accidental hanging at the mobile home park?

It's rumored by residents that Harry Horowitz of Hormi Holding Co., whose name appears on a deed dated June 1960, won the park in a card game. After Horowitz died, the property went to his widow Muriel. After her death in 1998, their son Sandford, a Hollywood producer residing in California, inherited the park—reluctantly, say residents, who never saw him much.

Today's residents paid anywhere from $20,000 to $80,000 for their mobile homes. All the homes here are single-wide.

HANGING ON TO HOME

With residents awaiting eviction, HOPE has filed suit against the current and former owners. The group is in litigation in Supreme Court in Nassau with Hormi Holding for civil fraud, for not disclosing to potential buyers—Pedote was one—that the park was being sold to a developer. HOPE withdrew an appeal after STP granted a six-month extension for tenants to relocate. But then STP slapped them with 30-day eviction notices, says Pedote.

"We won't give up," she insists. "We have no intention of vacating the premises."

Michael Mason, the Garden City lawyer representing STP, has a different perspective. "STP Associates has a pending motion to dismiss the case in the Supreme Court," he explains. "Eviction summary proceedings have not yet commenced in district court. It will be well into 2009 before any evictions will happen."

STP partner Rush had offered HOPE members a verbal deal of $500,000 in November 2007, but it never came to fruition. Pedote says the deal would have left the residents owing STP money.

In May, STP announced plans for a small strip mall to replace three Jericho Turnpike businesses, with 28 rental units over the storefronts. The plan is for the park to be replaced by five buildings, including 15 high-end condos starting at $750,000 each.

"From day one, we tried to be up front with the tenants and let them know what the realities were and tried to give them offers that even outside observers said were incredibly generous. It's acrimonious at this point," says Rush.

But the residents still see a chance of keeping their homes.

"We have an online petition with hundreds of names showing support from around the world. There are many avenues for a positive outcome," says Nelson Hess, secretary of HOPE. "Take the case of the Laurelton, N.J. mobile home where there was so much fraudulent

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