

ST. JAMES ARMENIAN CHURCH
Parish Assembly of 1989
BUILDING COMMITTEE REPORT FOR 1988

The Building Committee consists of 13 regular members as follows:

George Davidian, Chairperson
Ohan Bas
Garo Bashian
Anahid Birnbaum
Edward Essayan
Lionel Galstaum
Martha Gurahian
Dan Mushegian
Michael Pisani
Ara Shimshidian
Zaven Tachdjian
Hayk Tutak
Richard Varadian
Vincent Gurahian - Consultant

A total of fifteen meetings were held during the year. Seven of these were for the full membership while eight consisted of executive sessions. In addition, a Site sub-committee met on approximately ten weekends to investigate possible alternate sites for the proposed new church complex.

The early weeks of 1988 were spent preparing the application which was submitted to the Harrison Planning Board on February 23. The Planning Board refused to accept the application claiming the Environmental Impact Form accompanying the application to be inadequate. During this and subsequent meetings it became obvious that we were encountering strong resistance both from our neighbors and Board members who made clear their unsympathetic attitude. We were advised by our attorneys that if the application was to have any chance of success, we would require the services of a professional environmental consultant to assist in the preparation of a detailed environmental assessment form. Such a person, possessing expert's credentials would have standing to argue on our behalf at Board meetings. We retained the firm of Parish and Weiner as consultants. Meetings followed between church representatives and Mr. Mike Weiner in order that he have the necessary details concerning the intensity of our current and proposed use of the facilities.

Further, as a public relation effort, the Building Committee invited our neighbors to meet with us informally over coffee. On May 19 we met with several of our neighbors in order to respond to their questions and concern and attempt to allay their apprehensions concerning the development of our present site. Our guests' individual reactions ranged from unresponsive to coolly courteous to arrogant, offensive and blasphemous demands that we leave the area.

At the May 24 Planning Board meeting our application, now supported by an environmental statement adequate for this stage of the process, was once again submitted. Vigorous objections were raised to the application both by PEPA (Purchase Environmental Protection

Association) and by various attorneys representing our neighbors. The tone of the meeting was one of overt hostility during which the Board searched desperately for an excuse once again to reject the application. Our attorney, Jim Staudt, representing the firm of Taylor & McCullough, stubbornly resisted, insisting the application to be in good form. He finally prevailed and obliged the Planning Board to accept the application and to designate itself as the lead agency in further processing our application.

The extent and the intensity of the objections to our application not only by our neighbors and PEPA but by the Harrison Planning Board as well, gave us cause to pause and consider. When consulted, our attorneys declared their willingness to fight for our cause. They assured us that eventually our application to build a church would have to be approved. True, restrictions would probably be imposed regarding heights and dimensions of the roofline, cupola, cross, bell tower, etc. They warned, however, that the approval process would be both lengthy and costly--three to five years and perhaps \$300,000 or more in fees. However, with regard to the separate cultural hall, our attorneys were pessimistic, warning that approval was far less certain, even unlikely. They noted that our neighbors argue that what we call a cultural hall is in reality a "catering establishment" which will destroy the tranquility of Lincoln Avenue through commercial exploitation.

Responding to the uncertainties prevailing with respect to the Lincoln Avenue location, the Site Committee initiated a confidential search for a possible alternate site. Our goal was to find a site where the understandable concerns of neighbors could be addressed in a logical and rational manner. It was equally important to win the cooperation of the Planning Board in order that they accept the propriety and deal objectively and sympathetically with the overall concept of a church and cultural hall.

In the search for an alternate site we received suggestions from a PEPA representative. Altogether the Site Committee investigated eleven parcels located in Harrison, White Plains, Tarrytown, and Greenwich during the summer and early fall.

In the meantime, our attorneys suggested adjourning our appearances before the Planning Board in anticipation that if our search were to be successful in acquiring an alternate property, we would be spared the cost of preparing and defending a detailed Environmental Impact Form and a subsequent report.

As might be expected, all the alternate sites possessed both advantages and disadvantages. Several were undesirable locations or difficult terrain-wise to develop. Others were financially unfeasible. Still others posed approval problems similar to those we are presently experiencing.

One site holds considerable promise. Efforts are currently under way which it is hoped will eventually lead to a firm proposal being made to a special Parish Assembly recommending its acquisition.

This site is located at the intersection of Kenilworth Road and eastbound Westchester Avenue in Harrison, near the Greek Church of Our Saviour.

The advantages of this site include the following:

- 1 Easy access to the site via Westchester Avenue, Hutchinson River Parkway, Rt. 287, and Rt. 684.