

Crossgates mall proposal makes

By TOM FRIEDMAN

What issue would bring together a self-styled "ecologist" and a Republican town supervisor? The proposed Crossgates shopping mall in Guilderland's Pine Bush.

The ecologist is Don Rittner, head of Pine Bush Historic Preservation Project Inc., while the Republican town supervisor is Carl Walters of Guilderland.

Here's the story behind the unusual match:

In late August, Guilderland Republicans held a press conference to announce the \$85 million mall was not a political issue.

Ann Rose, an Albany County legislator, was chosen by party leaders to criticize Democratic statements made before and at state Environmental Conservation hearings on the mall impact on the Pine Bush. The essence of the statements: Crossgates was a campaign issue.

Rose accused the Democrats of taking "legitimate concerns over a questionable project" and sensationalizing them.

Analysis

Her comments upset Democrats, but they also spurred growth of a group called Concerned Citizens Against Crossgates.

The group, loosely organized before the hearings, started to consider ways to make the mall a big issue. It has since become a central concern for candidates of both parties running for county and town offices in Guilderland.

Concerned Citizens Against Crossgates is proof Crossgates has become a major concern in the western Albany suburb. In fact, at a recent meeting, a newcomer asked leaders of the group if they had announced support of particular candidates.

Group President Rhonda Childs answered: "We support whoever is against Crossgates."

Childs' statement has set the tenor of politics surrounding the town's November general election and the mall proposal.



CARL WALTERS



DON RITTNER

One political insider said recently of both: "The candidates who will win this year are the ones who can convince people that their position on Crossgates is right."

Some Democrats may have a similar opinion. They have made a habit of appearing at many gatherings of Concerned Citizens

strange bedfellows

Against Crossgates. They say they hope their presence will say something about their position on the issue.

But Rittner said last week he believes the Democrats are searching for an issue. And, he said, he has consequently begun to respect some Republicans.

"I think Republicans, such as Carl Walters, have shown understanding about problems associated with Crossgates," he said.

Rittner said he thinks the Republicans are outsmarting the Democrats. "The Democrats call it a Republican idea, when, in fact, development in the Pine Bush has been led by Albany County Democrats, such as Mayor Corning," he added. Rittner once worked on Mayor Erastus Corning II's city hall staff as an archaeologist.

Walters, on the other hand, has publicly opposed Crossgates for more than a year, he said. "He voted against it [zoning change for

the 170-acre Crossgates site] last August, and two weeks ago, he told Concerned Citizens Against Crossgates, he would try to answer some of their concerns.

In particular, the town supervisor said he would find out how the town can repeal a optional state law that allows new businesses lower tax rates and would oppose further widening of Western Avenue. Both items are desired by Crossgate developer, Pyramid Crossgates Co.

Some may say Rittner's zealous fight for Pine Bush preservation prevents him from knowing the good guys from the bad. Yet, it is clear, that he is one of many Guilderland voters who believe the most knowledgeable on the Crossgates issue are Republicans.

And so, it has been these events that coupled an ecologist with Walters, whose fellow Republicans said two months ago they would take no stance on Crossgates.