

**Community Dialogue on Safe Neighborhoods & Strong Community  
Neighbors of The Amberlands Shopping Center on Route 9A  
March 27, 2008  
Meeting Summary**

Thank you to our hosts at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship and thank you to those of you who attended the community dialogue Thursday, March 27<sup>th</sup>. It was an interesting evening! Many of you saw the article in *The Journal News*

(<http://www.lohud.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2008803280392>) and wondered about the attendance discrepancy. Robert Marchant wrote that 30 people attended. He's wrong. By our count, there were over 70 in the sanctuary. If Mr. Marchant subtracted speakers, facilitators and their guests, he should still have counted more than 50 community members. This is confirmed by Joan D'Amico, who attended the event and posted a note at the bottom of the web version of the *Journal* the article noting, "My estimate is that about 70 residents were in attendance." That's a good turnout.

Just this morning (April 4<sup>th</sup>) I picked up a copy of *The Gazette*, week of April 3 through 9, 2008. The dialogue covers the front page and continues inside. The journalist (no name attributed) took great notes during the meeting so you'll find many specifics in that piece that I do not cover below. I bought my copy at the Black Cow coffee shop. Below are my impressions of the dialogue, important take-away points and suggestions for next steps.

As of this writing, there are 69 contacts on this community distribution list. Of those, 37 of you (54%) live in the neighborhood around Furnace Dock Road and Route 9A. Another 15 (22%) live in the surrounding communities of Buchanan, Montrose, Croton Village, etc. And, 16 (24%) non-neighborhood town officials, police, people who live farther away, or did not provide an address. I will hand-deliver four paper copies of the message below to neighbors who do not use e-mail.

I am hiding your addresses ("bcc") on this message so that you know that your e-mail addresses will only be used for the purpose you intended when you provided them to me. That purpose is for communicating information to our community from the Town of Cortlandt, the police or from neighbors who are organizing neighborhood activities.

I thought the dialogue was an excellent first step. We managed to assemble an interesting and relevant list of speakers who presented an impressive amount of information. Neighbors came with serious concerns and questions, and had the opportunity to air them. The first chance for Q&A saw a lot of questions. By the time we got to our third group of speakers, we were well into the second hour. The agenda didn't go exactly according to plan but one of the main goals of the evening was to allow neighbors to air concerns and ask questions, and I did not want to cut that off unnecessarily. By the end of the evening, I had to modify the agenda and we didn't get to the break out, action groups. One of the assumptions going into the evening was that we wouldn't accomplish everything in one evening. Indeed. Some of your neighbors are already engaged in follow-up action. Perhaps you will feel inclined to get involved, too.

I was very pleased with our list of invited guests:

- Supervisor Linda Puglisi, Cortlandt Town Board
- Sergeant James Kranik, Station Commander, New York State Police - Cortlandt Barracks
- Investigator Steve Listner, New York State Police - Cortlandt Barracks
- Detective Sergeant John Nikitopoulos, Croton Police
- Sergeant Scott Sullivan, Westchester County Police, Department of Public Safety
- Detective Simone Guiseppi, Westchester County Police, Department of Public Safety
- Mr. Patel, Owner of the Watergate Motel
- Ms. Tina Volz Bongar, Westside Peekskill Neighborhood Association
- Lieutenant Catherine Johansen, Peekskill Police Department

In addition, we were pleased by other individuals who attended such as:

- the Mayor of Croton, Gregory Schmidt
- Reverend Jim Covington of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship that hosted us
- Councilman Frank Farrell, Cortlandt Town Board
- Councilman John Sloan, Cortlandt Town Board
- Ed Vergano, Director of Technical Services for the Town of Cortlandt
- James Flandreau, Deputy Director of Code Enforcement for the Town of Cortlandt
- Joe, the Manager of our A&P, along with their District Manager and Vice President  
(The A&P also donated cookies for the event. Thank you!)

Supervisor Linda Puglisi spoke about actions her office is taking to improve safety near commercial centers, asking business owners to increase lighting, etc. She also reported that Watergate has gone through a variety of inspections and only had minor infractions. Her office is concerned with the safety of our neighborhoods. She was accompanied by several members of her Board and staff, attesting to their commitment to these issues.

Next, we heard from Sergeant James Kranik who is the Station Commander of the New York State Police at the Cortlandt Barracks, Investigator Steve Listner who worked on the case of the woman abducted from the A&P, and Sergeant John Nikitopolous of the Croton Police. They talked us through what happened the night of February 26 and answered questions about that case. **It is important for us to know that our police and investigators engaged in fantastic work on this case, collaborating with their counterparts as far north as Beacon and bringing in a suspect in less than 48 hours. We are immensely grateful for their work!**

In addition, Sergeant Kranik brought data about crime in our community over the last five years. By his assertion, we live in a comparatively safe community. Regarding the Watergate, in the last five years there have been 33 police calls to that business, most of which were initiated by Mr. Patel (the owner) to assist in removing a disruptive guest or aid with someone who was not well. Only twice in the past five years has there been a drug related police call to the Watergate. The police also affirmed that the Watergate and the A&P have been very cooperative with their investigations.

Sergeant Scott Sullivan and Detective Simone Guiseppi of the Westchester County Police Department talked with us about registering and tracking convicted sex offenders. There is a level 3 (highest risk) sex offender living on Scenic Drive. Sergeant Sullivan and Detective Guiseppi paid him a visit to him prior to the dialogue and confirmed he is meeting his registry requirements. Every 90 days, their office checks in on each person in the registry. According to information given on the New York State, Department of Criminal Justice Services website ([http://www.criminaljustice.state.ny.us/nsor/off\\_responsibilities.htm](http://www.criminaljustice.state.ny.us/nsor/off_responsibilities.htm)), level 3 sex offenders or anyone defined as a sexual predator by the court must visit their local police department every 90 days to personally report their current address. These individuals must notify the DCJS within ten days of moving to a new address. There are a couple websites you can use to gain information about registered sex offenders. The Westchester County Government has a webpage dedicated to protecting children, which includes a link to the sex offender registry: <http://www.westchestergov.com/ptk/>. Another site Sergeant Sullivan mentioned is <http://www.familywatchdog.us/>.

I contacted Sergeant Scott Sullivan (Commanding Officer of the Crime Analysis Unit, Westchester County Police Department) again after the dialogue to confirm specific information. He e-mailed me the following:

*Members of the public can sign-up to receive Register Sex Offender Community Notifications issued by the Westchester County Police Department by going to <http://www.westchestergov.com/listssubscribe/ps/sorasubscribe.asp>. The Westchester County Police Department issues Community Notifications for Registered Sex*

*Offenders residing in the Town of Cortlandt and certain other areas and properties which fall under the primary jurisdiction of Westchester County or where a local police department does not exist.*

*There are several community organizations, such as Family Watchdog, which maintain websites which allow users to search for Registered Sex Offenders residing near a given location and/or provide pin mapping of Registered Sex Offenders.*

*The official New York State Sex Offender Registry Website is*  
<http://www.criminaljustice.state.ny.us/nsor/>

*The National Sex Offender Registry website hosted by the FBI is*  
<http://www.fbi.gov/hq/cid/cac/registry.htm>

*Also, for crime and suspicious activity reporting, members of the public can call the Westchester County Police at 914-862-5215. Members of the public can also call the Crime Tips Hotline at 800-898-8477.*

Mr. Patel, owner of the Watergate, and his wife attended the dialogue and addressed the community. There was a good exchange of information and some frank talk about the Motel that I thought was respectful and productive. One of the community members told Mr. Patel that he has concerns about activities those living in close proximity to the motel see that Mr. Patel might not see since he lives a few miles away. He further requested that Mr. Patel make the Watergate the sort of establishment he would want to live next door to with his family.

To his credit, Mr. Patel was open to hearing community concerns. This was also an opportunity for him to put a human face on his business. Mr. Patel is a family man who has raised his children in this community and shares our concerns for neighborhood safety. He noted that his customers come from a variety of backgrounds, as with any motel or hotel. Some stay one night; some stay for a couple weeks if they are working at Indian Point or on local construction jobs, for example. He confirmed that he has no contract with any Corrections or Social Services agencies (this was also confirmed by Supervisor Puglisi). He charges \$80 per night or \$400 per week. When someone checks in, they are required to present a government-issued id (drivers license or passport) and form of payment. He generally operates at about 30-40% occupancy. He doesn't want to be in the position of treating every customer like a potential criminal; he needs to be able to treat them like customers of his business. When there have been problems, he has called the police to remove the individuals.

Finally, we heard from Tina Volz Bongar of the Westside Peekskill Neighborhood Association and their police liaison, Lieutenant Catherine Johansen of the Peekskill Police Department. They shared their experience in setting up a neighborhood watch program and offered suggestions to this community, should we decide to do the same. If we decide to form a neighborhood watch, they will be a fantastic resources for us.

During the course of the evening, a neighbor who lives within sight distance of the Watergate asked the police if he could video tape activities of concern he sees and give those tapes to police. The police responded that they will accept videotaped materials to help inform them about community concerns. That is one good way to document activities and help the police establish patterns.

At the end of the meeting, one of the action areas I suggested was that since Mr. Patel doesn't live right next door to the Watergate, perhaps someone who does could act as a community liaison with

him. Mr. Patel was open to constructive interaction and left the dialogue knowing that the neighbors are watching. The day after the dialogue, I received a phone call from one of three neighbors who live within sight distance of the Watergate, informing me they are going to start documenting (video taping and note taking) what they see happening at odd hours. I e-mailed them forms from the NY Attorney General's website that are helpful for guiding residents in the type of information police need to collect. The forms are:

1) Reporting Suspected Criminal Activity:

[http://www.oag.state.ny.us/crime/neighborhood\\_watch/forms/suspected\\_criminal\\_activity.pdf](http://www.oag.state.ny.us/crime/neighborhood_watch/forms/suspected_criminal_activity.pdf)

2) Reporting Neighborhood Nuisances:

[http://www.oag.state.ny.us/crime/neighborhood\\_watch/forms/reporting\\_neighborhood\\_nuisances.pdf](http://www.oag.state.ny.us/crime/neighborhood_watch/forms/reporting_neighborhood_nuisances.pdf)

The police encouraged us all to document and contact them about any activities of concern in our neighborhoods. Several times during the evening, the point was made that it takes individual initiative to make a difference in our community. That's an important take-away message. **If you see a problem, you need to do something. If you see someone you suspect is engaged in drug use or prostitution, why aren't you calling the police? The police can't do anything about it if they don't know. We're the ones who live in our neighborhoods and are here day and night, so we're the ones who will see the problems and can help establish patterns. If we want things to change, we need to report problems. We need to work with the police.**

For me, this is one of the successes of the evening: we helped initiate an important piece of understanding and communication between the community and the Watergate, as well as between the community and the police.

We do not want to suggest that the Watergate is the source of the problem in our community, or even that we have a terrible problem of crime in our community. The statistics that Sergeant Kranik presented confirm that we live in a pretty safe neighborhood, comparatively speaking. Violent crime is not part of our daily lives here. Thank heavens! We do not want to blow the scope of the problem out of proportion. Still, in any community there is the potential for crime and we need to be cautious.

**Another important message from the evening was: if someone or something seems out of place to you, they probably are. Listen to your "gut instinct"; it may guide you away from a potentially harmful situation.**

The man who abducted the woman from the A&P parking lot and sexually assaulted her was not associated with the Watergate. He was not a resident of this community. He was an outsider who came here to visit someone living in a local apartment complex. How do we guard against that sort of predator? I know some of the suggestions (walls, gates, arms, etc.) but they lead to a type of society I don't care to live in. I prefer an approach where we get to know each other better, look out for each other more, and build a stronger community based on inclusion, communication and understanding rather than fear and exclusion.

**One thing we showed on March 27<sup>th</sup> was that we are a community that comes together and will stand united behind the message that we will not tolerate criminal activity in our neighborhoods! We have a police force that acts swiftly and professionally to bring criminals to justice, and town officials who support efforts of community building and empowerment. The strongest crime prevention emerges from neighbors coming together and then joining efforts with the police and town officials. It's up to us to make that happen. A community is only as strong as you want to make it, or as you see a need for. You can't rely on someone else to do this for you. The town and police can only impact to a point – the rest is up to us.**

The survivor of this awful crime is just that, a survivor. For no particular reason, she happened to be in that place at that time. It makes me shiver to think that I was there nearly the same time the night before. When faced with horrible options, or no options at all, she made the best decisions she could in the moment. And they were good decisions when we consider she's alive today. None of us knows what we would do in a situation like that, how we would respond. We'd like to think that we would find a way out, but we just never know what we would be able to do. Every person is different; every situation is different.

To the survivor: Please know that you are in our thoughts and prayers. We are mortified that this happened to you and we offer you our full care and support.

Throughout the evening, we took notes on two flip charts, capturing: 1) Issues of Concern and 2) Possible Action Areas. These are the points from the sheets:

Issues of Concern:

- Convicted violent offenders live in our community
- Moving from high crime areas to our "safe" community, now no longer feels safe
- Tracking sex offenders and getting updates
- Security at the Watergate Motel
- Vacant homes attracting squatters
- Lighting and security at the A&P

Concerns that Suggested Possible Action Areas:

- Tighten the laws on sex offenders
- Community updates on sex offenders (every 6 months?) (there is an e-mail service provided by the county)
- Information on community crime – statistics to compare to other communities
- More community response awareness – self-protection skills, classes
- Supply information and suspicions to police
- Education to counter complacency – be alert, especially among neighbors
- Do we have a sufficient number of officers on the streets? Analyze needs and data.
- Monitor volunteers working with our children – background checks
- Communication with police – "I'll get that information to you" Who is you? How? (*now we have this e-mail distribution list – that's a start*)
- Videotape problems
- If you call for help and get a dispatcher you aren't satisfied with, escalate the issue to the supervisor
- Look at nuisance laws
- Document observations using Attorney General's forms (*website links listed above*)
- Regular contact with police

At the end of the evening, I grouped these issues into potential

Action Areas to Get us Started:

1) Laws. We talked quite a bit about laws regarding offenders returning to communities as well as town codes regulating security around businesses. This suggests action in the form of researching, lobbying and letter writing campaigns to restructure or tighten laws.

2) Neighborhood watch and communication in the community. Much of what we discussed revolves around open lines of communication – among neighbors, with the police and the town. People were interested in receiving updates, having information in the form of statistics, being able to talk with the police, and conveying a public message about where this community stands on crime. These seem to come together, at least initially, under an umbrella of a neighborhood watch or association.

3) Self-protection classes. Some indicated an interest in enhancing their own personal safety through self-defense classes.

4) Community liaison with the Watergate. We established that Mr. Patel shares our concern for neighborhood safety but does not live right next door to the Watergate and may not be aware of some of what others see at odd hours. He is open to having a liaison who can help keep him informed about issues of concern and convey to the community safety measures he is taking.

**Are you interested in follow up on any of these?**

In all, neighbors got to hear from each other and got to know their town officials and local police better. A lot of information was shared and I think we started down the path of building a stronger community. We also communicated (even if only briefly) that this is a community that comes together and values safety. That's worth a lot.

**What's next? Perhaps one of you would like to organize another meeting to discuss a neighborhood watch.** Perhaps we could approach the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship about using their sanctuary again. The Attorney General's webpage has a lot of good information on associations and the National Sherrifs' Association has information about the National Neighborhood Watch Program (internet links provided in "additional resources" below).

We should all feel empowered to get involved. **Again, the strongest crime prevention and neighborhood safety emerge from neighbors who come together and then join efforts with the police and town officials. It's up to us to make that happen. A community is only as strong as you want to make it, or as you see a need for. The town and police can only impact to a point – the rest is up to us.**

If you received this message as a forward and would like to be added to the community contact list, please e-mail me at [brenemanpennas@gmail.com](mailto:brenemanpennas@gmail.com), sending your name, e-mail, phone and mailing address. I will be glad to add you.

Tracy Breneman-Pennas  
914-862-2367

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Responsibility for policing our area is under the jurisdiction of the state and county police. Sergeant James Kranik of the New York State Police is the Station Commander for the Cortlandt Barracks, located at the entrance to the Cortlandt train station. Questions may be directed to the Barracks' administrative number: 914-737-7171.
- USA on Watch – National Sherrifs' Association – National Neighborhood Watch Program  
<http://www.usaonwatch.org>
  - To register a new community watch:  
<http://www.usaonwatch.org/Registration/RegSelectAnLEA.php>
  - Article: "Two Successful Neighborhood Watch Show How It's Done"  
<http://www.usaonwatch.org/EZine/EZineMainArticle.php?EZineID=20071011>
  - Article: "Looking Out for Each Other"  
<http://www.usaonwatch.org/EZine/EZineMainArticle.php?EZineID=20060522>
  - Article: "Fighting for Quality of Life"  
<http://www.usaonwatch.org/EZine/EZineMainArticle.php?EZineID=20060508>
- New York State Attorney General neighborhood watch information  
[http://www.oag.state.ny.us/crime/neighborhood\\_watch/neighborhood\\_watch\\_toc.html](http://www.oag.state.ny.us/crime/neighborhood_watch/neighborhood_watch_toc.html)
- New York State – Division of Criminal Justice Services – Office of Sex Offender Management, Sex Offender Registry: <http://criminaljustice.state.ny.us/nsor/index.htm>
  - 15,567 registered sex offenders in the state of New York as of February 6, 2003
  - A Level 1 offender is defined as a "low risk of repeat"; level 2 as a "moderate risk of repeat"; level 3 as a "high risk of repeat and a threat to the public." Level 1 offenders are required to register for a minimum of twenty years, and level 2 and 3 offenders for life.
- Parents for Megan's law: <http://www.parentsformeganslaw.com/>
- Human Rights Watch report, "No Easy Answers: Sex Offender Laws in the US":  
<http://hrw.org/reports/2007/us0907/>
- US Department of Justice – Office of Justice – Bureau of Justice Assistance (Solutions for Safer Communities) <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/BJA/what/2a2jwactbackground.html>
  - Project Safe Neighborhoods (gun violence)  
<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/BJA/grant/psn.html>
  - Overview and History of the Jacob Wetterling Act  
<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/BJA/grant/jacob/2a1jwacthistory.html>
- The Southern Poverty Law Center tracks and actively works to counter hate groups. They SPLC counted 888 active hate groups in the United States in 2007. Only organizations and their chapters known to be active during 2007 are included. All hate groups have beliefs or practices that attack or malign an entire class of people, typically for their immutable characteristics.  
<http://www.splcenter.org/intel/map/hate.jsp>
- Westchester County Human Rights Commission: <http://www.westchestergov.com/hrc.htm>