Thomas Murphy

Professor McIntosh

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Save The Wetlands!

“In torrential rains, the water moves through our condo community to the wetlands,” said Gabriella Velardi-Ward, a Mariners Harbor resident, who is leading a group of locals in protest against the destruction of the Graniteville wetlands in Staten Island. An ongoing issue that is destroying our cities is the industrialization of natural habitats, specifically focusing on wetlands. Wetlands protect the area surrounding them from flooding, and when these habitats are destroyed by man-made structures, the water has nowhere to go which causes flood.

When hurricane Sandy hit New York City, the damages were horrifying. According to Anne Barnard of the New York Times, there were 48 deaths, more than half of them in Staten Island. If the Graniteville wetlands had not been in commission, the death toll from Sandy would’ve been much higher, as the flooding would have swept the north shore off the island. Even in a more recent storm hurricane Ida, more than half of the island was under water. However, the north shore area surrounding the Graniteville wetlands still did receive some flooding, but nowhere near as bad as other neighborhoods because most of the water relocated to the wetlands, keeping the community safe.

Currently in Staten Island, New York, the wholesale company BJ’s is planning on constructing a 28-acre superstore, 800 car parking lot, and a gas station right on top of one of the only major wetlands the island has left, the Graniteville wetlands. This of course stirred up anger in many Staten Island residents. One resident for example who stated, “You can white-water raft in every downpour,” said Ms. Thurman, who heads a [local environmental group](http://sinorthshoreresilience.org/?p=60). “To turn around and say this wetland or any other wetland is not significant for water retention, it just lacks all practicality, all sense of reason.”

In an interview with local Staten Islander Joshua Soler, the voice of the people is demonstrated even further. Joshua lives in New Springville, south of Graniteville. In recent times with Hurricane Ida and the several other storms Staten Island has received, his house has been flooded several times, and his basement is completely ruined, along with part of the first floor of his house. “Something has to be done about the drainage systems on this Island. So many people I know from my neighborhood and across the island have lost their cars in the past month, their homes, their belongings to these storms,” Joshua stated. “If they build this BJ’s in Graniteville, it will only get worse.”

BJ’s wholesale club has argued that the store would bring in 200 local jobs, but is 200 jobs worth the damage that this store will bring to the community? Not only will this store be the reason that an entire area of Staten Island will be swept away by floods, but all forms of wildlife will be obliterated as well! The wetlands are home to thousands of mature trees, and a plethora of plants such as swamp white oak, sweetgum, wild sarsaparilla, and red maple. Wetlands are also home to many animals such as frogs, salamanders, muskrats and several species of birds. Without their native lands, they will have nowhere to go and will likely perish.

Since BJ’s has announced their plan to build on Staten Island, residents have band together and fought to stop the wholesale club from constructing the superstore. One way the people have fought back is through social media, which is a very effective method to protest in today’s society. Instagram page “@savegranitevillewetlands” has been a major help in the protest and the movement to halt BJ’s production. For instance, they have set up multiple marches and protests on Staten Island in which thousands of residents came out to voice their views on the issue. In addition to that they have put together virtual protests where they have their thousands of supporters post this message: “BJ’s, if you build on the Graniteville wetlands, I vow not to become a member. I vow not to shop at your store.” They have made major waves on social media, with hashtag “#SaveGranitevilleWetlands,” which was trending on twitter in all 5 boroughs of New York City.

One reason why the #SaveGranitevilleWetlands movement was so powerful was because the main audience the protesters were targeting were government officials such as Governor Cuomo, Mayor DeBlasio, Staten Island borough president James S. Oddo, and City Council representative Debi Rose. If there is anyone that can stop the BJ’s from being built, it is these four. The social media crew has put together several protests at Borough Hall in St. George, rep. Debi Rose’s place of work. Representative Rose is one of the main people who signed off on letting the BJ’s overrule the law of building on natural areas. Anne Barnard of the New York Times states that, “The project’s supporters — including the Staten Island borough president, James S. Oddo, and the area’s City Council representative, Debi Rose — said in recent interviews that they shared concerns about building on natural areas. But they contend that the developer had a legal right to build.”

Since the protests have gone down, nothing has really changed. The BJ’s wholesale club still plans on building their store, the government has yet to do anything about it, and Staten Islanders are furious. Not only are they furious, but frightened. Frightened for the future of their city, the safety and security of their homes, and for hurricanes and storms in the future.

Hopefully all the attention being brought to this issue will change the government leaders’ minds, and hopefully the BJ’s will back out of their plan, but until then, we can only keep protesting and hope for the best.

Sources

<https://www.instagram.com/savegranitevillewetlands/>

Barnard, Anne. “These Wetlands Helped Stop Flooding From Sandy. Now a BJ'S May Move in.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 28 Oct. 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/28/nyregion/wetlands-staten-island-bjs.html>