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Environmental Activist Reaches Out to 3 Levels of State Government to Protect Trees in Suburban Ecosystems

East Hills, NY 9/3/13 -- An independent environmental activist who has been battling his own suburban Long Island village to force it to protect its trees has appealed for help to the top state environmental official in a seven-page manifesto, as well as renewing calls to the local village and town to better preserve the suburban ecology.

Activist Richard Brummel wrote: "I am extremely concerned about the loss of trees in various ecosystems around the state that I have encountered," in his detailed letter to the commissioner of the state Department of Environmental Conservation, Joseph Martens, last week.

His letter, which was also addressed to the head of the state Assembly's Committee on the Environment and the leader of the SUNY School of Environmental Science and Forestry, lists many threats to the state's trees from human activity, especially in suburbs, and proposes a list of reforms.

Among the reforms is a change in state law to grant 'legal standing' to any person in the state who wishes to defend the environment -- eliminating a common technicality used in New York to stifle citizen lawsuits -- and the promulgation of an explicit state policy to protect trees and open space.

He also urged that local governments be mandated to protect trees and that electric utilities be prevented from destroying or seriously damaging trees along their rights of way without scientific justification.

Mr. Brummel related his own disappointing experiences in watching trees frequently cut down by builders and residents in his town and village on Long Island, often seemingly flying in the face of laws designed to protect them.

In a letter to the Village of East Hills, where he lives, Mr. Brummel asked Village officials to tighten up on the issuance of permits to remove healthy trees and allow the public to be far more involved in the process. He also asked for an investigation of illegal tree removals.

Under a Freedom of Information Law disclosure, Mr. Brummel was able to review permits issued by a village official over four months -- over 100 files in all. In his findings, reported on his website as well, he claimed the permits were

being issued for questionable purposes, were lacking in substance, and/or failed to require replacement of all the trees removed.

In some cases, healthy trees up to 20 or 30 inches in diameter were allowed to be removed with no stated reason, or with the reason given that homeowners had fear of the trees -- a reason not substantiated by any professional opinion in most cases, among other questionable reasons.

In a letter to the officials of the Town of North Hempstead, Mr. Brummel questioned the actual official enforcement of the tree protection law, and urged that it be extended to protect all trees on a property -- not just those in a front yard. He proposed provisions to involve the public and increase fines, as well.

His town councilman arranged a meeting with town officials in mid-January

Mr. Brummel worked extensively in East Hills in an attempt to improve environmental awareness and policy over the past two years. He collected a petition of dozens of neighbors, he twice took the Village to court, he frequently testified at hearings and before village boards, and has tried to recruit neighbors to form a new "green" civic association.

(See Planet-in-Peril.org/easthills/east-hills-index.html for details.)

"This is an unheralded area of environmental conflict, this continued building and re-building craze. It is really a reckless and unjustifiable assault on nature. We know better now, and we do not need the level of luxury given its cost. But I am quite disappointed at the lack of traction these issues are getting," he said

"The local newspapers refuse to cover them anymore, or take a mocking tone when they occasionally do. Village officials have worked hard to marginalize me with crude, untruthful attacks. But I keep at it because there is no one else defending these trees, this habitat for animals, and this ecosystem on a local basis that I know of. Major environmental groups are just silent on this issue, at least around here," Mr Brummel said.

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