



TO: OUR NEIGHBORS ON GRAMERCY PARK
FROM: ARLENE S. HARRISON
PRESIDENT, GRAMERCY PARK BLOCK ASSOCIATION
SUBJECT: THE GRAMERCY PARK HOTEL
DATE: JANUARY 24, 2005

As you may know, during the past two weeks the Gramercy Park Hotel has raised the ire of much of the Gramercy Park community.

The Hotel, now owned by Ian Schrager, began construction work that involved chopping down a healthy 32-year-old willow oak tree, proposed changes in traffic patterns and undertook other actions that have had an effect on the quality-of-life of neighborhood residents. What had our neighbors absolutely furious was that all of this occurred without prior consultation with our Block Association, the neighborhood group that represents more than 1,600 Park residents.

In response to over 300 communications I received from angry residents, I immediately contacted Ian Schrager and organized a meeting that was held on January 11th at the Hotel. Represented at the meeting were the Gramercy Park Block Association, the Gramercy Park Hotel Management Team, Community Board Six, and members of the 13th Police Precinct, the Department of Transportation, and the Parks Department.

The following are some of the highlights of the meeting:

1. **The Tree:** I learned at the meeting that discussions about the tree between the Schrager Team and the Parks Department had begun in October, and although the tree was taken down in January, no one consulted the Gramercy Park Block Association. When one of our buildings here on Gramercy Park begins construction and has a question about a tree someone usually calls me to check on what he or she should do about it. I then call one of our "tree experts" who gives advice on what should be done. Had we been notified, one of our "tree experts" would have at the very least explored other options. According to one of our prominent horticulturalists, this particular tree was the most magnificent, beautifully formed shade tree of any in our neighborhood, from Park Avenue South to Third Avenue, including inside and outside the Park. We learned that there was a tree

that was not in particularly good shape in a tree garden next to the tree that was removed. They possibly could have considered placing their loading dock there. We don't know.

At the meeting, I requested that the Deputy Commissioner of the Parks Department see to it that one of our experts be involved in the selection of an appropriate replacement tree. She agreed to that. I learned at the meeting that Schragger had donated \$20,000 to the Parks Department to purchase 40 replacement trees for the City. I requested that these 40 trees remain in the Gramercy Park neighborhood. If we do not need all 40 of the trees I requested that they at least remain within the confines of Community Board Six. The Parks Department will be getting back to me about this.

2. **Traffic:** There are three lanes of traffic on Gramercy Park North. Both the north and south lanes are used for parking while the middle one is used for traffic. The original plan presented at the meeting by the Schragger Team was to utilize the north lane of Gramercy Park North as a construction lane because a hoist will hoist an exterior elevator there during construction. The middle lane was to be used for construction deliveries to take place from 7:00 am until 3:00 pm. The south lane, formerly containing seven parking meters (now the meters are disabled to prevent parking there), had been designated as the through-lane for traffic. At 3:00 pm, the traffic lane was to be relocated from the south lane back to the middle lane. Both Community Board Six and the 13th Precinct felt that this plan would only increase confusion and congestion. I detailed the long history of traffic problems on Gramercy Park, including gridlock, horn-honking, trucks unable to make the turn from Lexington Avenue going west on Gramercy Park North, the fact that Gramercy Park North is the first cross street from east to west for vehicles coming off the FDR Drive, the convergence of two traffic lanes coming down Lexington into one traffic lane on Gramercy Park North, and vehicles crashing into the gates of Gramercy Park. This situation has been exacerbated in the past 15 years by the proliferation of night clubs and restaurants in the Chelsea and Flatiron areas.

At the meeting, we described the recent work of the Block Association's Traffic Committee, which is composed of all the building presidents, owners and institution heads on Gramercy Park North. We accomplished a great deal working with Community Board Six, the Department of Transportation, and the 13th Police Precinct, including a replacement of missing signs on Lexington Avenue and the installation of new signs (including "local truck route" and right arrow sign) on the southeast corner of Lexington and 23rd Street. These new signs have reduced the number of commercial vehicles getting stuck trying to make the turn onto Gramercy Park North from Lexington Avenue. Additional signs were added, including "Don't Block the Box" ones at intersections with gridlock boxes and "Third Avenue Alternate Route" signs to encourage traffic to use Third Avenue while coming downtown.

At the meeting, it was apparent that Schragger's team knew very little about the extent of traffic congestion on Gramercy Park North. Deputy Inspector Paul McCormack of the 13th Precinct recommended instead that the south lane always be designated as the through-lane throughout the day rather than switching to the middle lane at 3:00 pm. The Department of Transportation will now seek permission for this change and get

back to us with it. They will also review a proposal submitted by Community Board Six for a possible traffic detour at Lexington Avenue.

3. **Scaffolding:** Although the scaffolding was erected in accordance with City regulations, stating that it must be extended 20 feet beyond the existing property line of the property being renovated, in this case it was extended much further than that. It was explained to me that they could not stop exactly at 20 feet because they would have blocked the entrance to a doctor's office, so the extension of the scaffolding they built went way past the doctor's office and came close to the 60 Gramercy Park North awning, blocking the two front windows of an apartment. In working with the owner of the apartment and the Hotel management, we were able to identify the problem and the Hotel construction team was able to come up with a solution. Now the scaffolding is 12-15 feet away from the 60 GPN building awning and blocks only one window of the owner's apartment. I also talked about the replacement of the gardens in front of 60 Gramercy Park North that are directly under the scaffolding. The Hotel has agreed to replace or repair any outdoor gardens that are damaged as a result of the scaffolding. The scaffolding should remain in place for approximately one year.
4. **Construction Points of Interest:** The construction team installed a permanent sidewalk shed lighting about a week ago. They began constructing some tree protection of other trees. Beginning January 24th, they will begin to place construction barricades along Lexington Avenue, and will also start construction of a sidewalk shed along Lexington Avenue. They will pour a concrete base pad for a Lexington Avenue hoist. During the week of the January 31st, they plan to install sidewalk shed permanent lighting on Lexington Avenue and will begin building a Lexington Avenue hoist tower and loading dock.
5. **Communication:** I am pleased that Ian Schrager and his team have now assured me that they will immediately begin holding regular meetings with me and other members of the Block Association, and consult with us in advance about all plans that will affect the quality-of-life of the people who reside on Gramercy Park. I will serve as the liaison between the Hotel and our building owners, presidents, institution heads and representatives of the 38 of 39 buildings on Gramercy Park that are part of the Gramercy Park Block Association's Communication Network. I will also serve as the liaison between our community and the Hotel. If you have any quality-of-life concerns that you wish me to bring to the attention of the Hotel team, please e-mail me at arlenesharrison@yahoo.com.

During the past two weeks, Schrager and I have been in regular contact. I am hopeful that this will be the beginning of a new relationship between the Hotel and our community. Schrager assures me that he is committed to being a good neighbor, and will do everything possible to make a positive contribution to our neighborhood.