

Staten Islanders continue fight over Jesuit retreat house

Jamie Manson | Mar. 3, 2014 NCR Today

Back in October, I [reported](#) [1] on the Jesuits' proposed sale of Mount Manresa, their 100-year old retreat house in Staten Island, New York.

Citing the financial burdens of operating the facility and a need to expand their retreat ministry beyond of the walls of a retreat house, the New York Province of the Society of Jesus sold the property for \$15 million to the Savo Brothers, a development group specializing in luxury townhomes and strip malls.

The proposed sale raised the ire of Staten Island residents and elected officials across party lines. They argued that any development would be unsustainable in an area of the City that is already over-developed, over-populated and in desperate need of green space.

Manresa's 15-acre property boasts a pristine, old-growth forest containing almost 100 native oak, tulip, and black tupelo trees estimated to be at least 150 years old, as well as the oldest grotto in the city, which was built into the bottom of the glacial hill in the 1860s. The master masons were so skilled that they interlocked each stone in a beautiful pattern without the use of cement, creating a structure that still survives 150 years later.

More recently, Manresa offered lodging to first responders after the September 11th attacks and housed the Red Cross Service Center for Staten Island and a DNA collection and counseling center for victims' relatives. From November 2012 through the summer of 2013, the retreat house sheltered families displaced by Super Storm Sandy.

Though the Committee to Save Mount Manresa managed to tie up the sale in court for months, in February a judge allowed the sale to go through. The Savo Brothers, who have remained mum on their plans for the property, quickly rolled in heavy equipment and removed the retreat house's stone sign. They also fenced in Manresa's grounds, which had always remained open to the community for walks, prayer and contemplation.

The Committee and elected officials have not given up the fight. Leading a rally on the steps of City Hall last Wednesday, Council member Debi Rose introduced a resolution to save the property. The resolution will be voted on in the future, and though it does not have legal power, it promises raise awareness of the loss of Manresa's natural treasure. Rose, who quickly garnered the support of NYC's new Public Advocate Letitia James, also said that Mayor Bill de Blasio's office has promised to look into the issue.

Though Republican officials agree that the property should be preserved, they suggest an alternative strategy. Council members Vincent Ignizio and Steven Matteo said in a join statement:

"The Staten Island delegation is united on this issue: None of us want the Mount Manresa site destroyed or altered in any way. However, with the sale now finalized, we believe the best course of action is to work with the new owner to ensure that the community has input in what is developed, and to preserve as much of this historic treasure as possible."

Manresa wasn't the only Jesuit retreat house in New York to be sold developers last year.

In August, the New York Province also sold their Long Island retreat house Inisfada, a majestic 87-room mansion set on 33 acres, to a Hong Kong developer for \$36 million. Efforts to fight that sale were quickly defeated. Stunning [photos](#) [2] from Newsday reveal that demolition of Inisfada (which is Gaelic for Long Island) began in December.

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[1] <http://ncronline.org/node/62446>

[2] <http://www.newsday.com/long-island/nassau/almost-half-of-st-ignatius-retreat-house-demolished-1.6556957>