

Hillside Woods Background

Hillside Woods is an approximately 52 acre woods that adjoins Hillside Park. The 48-acre Hillside Park, which envelopes Hillside Elementary School, Chemka Pool, the Village tennis courts and Sugar Pond, was taken over by the Village in the mid-1900s after it had been abandoned for decades.

In 1986, Children's Village, a boarding facility for children in difficult circumstances, which is located in the neighboring town of Dobbs Ferry, sold about 52 acres of its property that was in Hastings to a developer, Coachlight Properties of Hastings, Inc.. The developer was planning to build close to 100 homes that would have resulted in high traffic volume on the narrow, hilly, local roads adjoining Hillside Elementary School. A sizeable community group formed creating a committee to, "Save Hillside Woods." They fanned public support and mobilized residents, raising close to \$800,000 from local residents and through various organizations. The 1987 stock market crash and the subsequent receivership of the bank that held the mortgage on the property eventually resulted in the purchase of the property from the FDIC with the funds accumulated and a bond floated by the Village of Hastings. Two thirds of the \$3,350,000 purchase price was funded by the Village, and the County paid the balance. It was a remarkable community effort to expand Hillside Woods and maintain the green space and the indigenous flora and fauna abounded there.

Although the acquisition of Hillside Woods amply demonstrated the value to this community of protecting the natural forest, the village was not aware that purchasing it was in itself insufficient to preserve it as a natural environment. There was never a forest management plan to monitor and ensure the continued health of the woods. Dearly beloved village resident, Fred Hubbard, who during his life championed the woods and was responsible for many of the trails within it, actually wrote about the degeneration of the woods that he observed in the 1970s, well before it was acquired by the Village.

The need for restoration and regeneration of the woods has now become abundantly clear and is becoming a priority. It is cited in a number of Village plans and the associated initiatives underway, including the 2016 Long-Range Plan for Strategic Management of Parks and Recreation Assets, the Deer Immunocontraception Research Project, the upcoming State of the Woods Forum, the Hillside Nature Guides Program, and the elementary and high school educational projects. The Hastings Vine Squad was established and, trained by Groundwork Hudson Valley, began removing the invasive vines that are strangling, shading and obscuring the trees. This volunteer effort has grown with Vine Squad members removing vines from trees in public spaces all over the village every second weekend from November to March.

Restoration the Hillside Park and Woods to a healthy Eastern woodlands must begin with a full understanding of its severely deteriorated condition, which was in large part triggered by the overpopulation of deer. As recently as twenty-five years ago the parks had dense bramble and vegetation at ground level. A diversity of species lived in the understory, and the next generation of trees was nurtured there. In the last two decades, however, the deer have

decimated almost everything native from six feet high down to ground level. This threatens the woods as the next generation of trees is consumed before they can mature, and a whole ecology of species that existed in the understory is gone. The non-native earthworm population has exploded partly due to deer over abundance and caused a near collapse of the ground litter food web.

Lack of understory has allowed invasive non-native vines to proliferate, jeopardizing the health of the ecosystem. Without their natural enemies, these invasive plants have been able to establish and proliferate rapidly, extirpating native flora and threatening fauna that relied on the native plants. The large trees in the forest are also thinning, as erosion and the rocky ground produce shallow root structures unable to anchor them during severe storms. As trees fall, the remaining trees are even more susceptible to being toppled by strong winds.

The challenge now is to apprise the village residents of the dire state of the woods and the need for action. The State of the Woods forum was the first opportunity to do that. The village has just applied for funding from the New York State DEC Urban Forestry program to fund a sample-based tree survey and begin the development of a management plan. Three village entities, the Parks and Recreation Commission, the Conservation Commission and the Tree Preservation Board, have a stake in the woods restoration and are working together to initiate and sustain the effort.