

From the Editor

Williamsburg Priorities: Artists & Others for a Livable Neighborhood

by Kirsten Hively

New York based Mothers & Others for a Livable Planet—one of my favorite nonprofits—closed up shop last year. I liked the concept behind the name—mothers have a special concern for environmental issues and form a core, but everyone is welcomed to join. The core of mothers gave Mothers & Others a concrete perspective, rooted in simple actions like buying locally grown apples and cutting back on the use of toxic house cleaners. They've left a vacuum that I think can best be filled on the neighborhood level.

I recently read a book called *The Consumer's Guide to Effective Environmental Choices: Practical Advice from the Union of Concerned Scientists* by Michael Brower & Warren Leon. Like Mothers & Others, The Union of Concerned Scientists starts with a core group—in this case scientists—to make changes. The book takes a simple but powerful angle: priorities. What are the most pressing environmental problems that face us? What are the most important choices consumers can make to affect these problems? None of us have time to fix all the problems around us, and it's frustrating to watch volunteers and nonprofits dissapating their energy on countless potential solutions to countless real problems.

What does this have to do with Williamsburg? We lack a unified set of priorities. We have so many battles to fight, our energies are so scattered, that we risk losing everything. I think we need to come together and make a short list of priorities (maybe 10?) that we can all work on for the next couple of years. Could we have an election of ideas instead of politicians? Then we could focus on solutions.

Once we decide what's important by drawing up a list of our top ten priorities (in order), we need to look at what we can do to make them happen. Like Mothers & Others and The Union of Concerned Scientists, I think we need a core group, and I think artists are the perfect choice. Which doesn't mean anyone else should be excluded—they should be welcomed with open arms. But artists can be any race, any religion, any age, so it seems like it would be the most inclusive group, while still maintaining a focus. Artists have creativity and energy that would be useful for any project.

More questions: Who has time to make changes? Who has money to make changes? Who has skills to make changes? Who has space? Where can information be exchanged? Could a volunteer registry be kept safe? How could we celebrate successes? How could we reward heroes? Would incorporating as a foundation be helpful, or just more beurocracy? What would it be called? (Artists & Others for a Livable Neighborhood? Artists+? Creative Answers Now? Community Action Network? Creative Futures? Connections? Future Power?) What kind of coalitions could be built (business owners, gallery owners, artists, students, parents, home owners, renters, rentors, art buyers, students...)? What do we want Williamsburg to look like in five years? In ten years? In seven generations? What models could inspire us (Ithaca's Ithaca Hours barter program might be an example—www.lightlink.com/hours/ithacahours)?

This and more online at www.wburg.com.

Here are some of the possible priorities, under five basic headings, that come to my mind, although I'm sure there are many more:

Protect Our Air, Land & Water

- Prevent TGE power plant
- Remove the Domino Sugar power plant
- Strengthen the Watchperson project
- Find and stop the top 10 polluters in Williamsburg, organize boycotts
- Plant and care for street trees—watering, gates, plants (school kids, business owners, BIDs)
- Create a free waterfront park with eco education center
- Clean up the East River and Newtown Creek (start a branch of Riverkeepers?)
- BQE mitigation (sound, air pollution, noise, splitting of neighborhood)
- Prevent the NISA barge
- Support gardening (soil testing, native plants, food plants)
- Reduce toxic use in the neighborhood (encourage alternatives to toxic products like dry cleaners, house cleaners, art supplies, etc.)

Protect Our Streets

- Improve the most dangerous intersections and crosswalks (like the on-ramps to BQE, school crossings, and Metropolitan Ave crossings; provide pedestrian awareness training for traffic cops, install ped crossing signs, repaint crosswalks) and pedestrian safety in general
- More bike lanes and bike racks
- Traffic calming (speed bumps, traffic light timing, wider sidewalks, more speed limit signs, etc.)
- Reduce trucks & garbage
- More beat cops on foot, bike cops, and bridge cops
- Improve fire safety (education?)

Protect Our Food

- Expand the farmer's markets (more vendors, more days)
- Encourage locally grown food (encourage labels for locally grown apples and other produce, more CSAs)
- Encourage food gardening (education, supplies, garden store)

Protect Our Rights

- Strengthen the community board (web site, term limits)
- Simplify political districts
- Encourage small businesses and co-ops (microlending, start a Made in Williamsburg campaign)
- Voter registration drive
- Create a community center
- Improve renters' rights

Protect Our History

- Preserve and protect historic buildings
- Historic documentation (document stories like the wave of Black artists that came to Williamsburg in the 1970s)
- Instal plaques and signs on the birthplaces and former homes of famous Williamsburgers

So, who wants to take up the challenge? Do you have neighborhood priorities not on this list? What would your top ten priorities be?

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