

# Profile of Concerned Residents of Southeast (CRSE)

BY CHRISTOPHER M. WILDE

**C**OLLABORATION WITH LOCAL COMMUNITY GROUPS IS A CENTRAL COMPONENT OF RIVERKEEPER'S CAPACITY TO COMBAT HARMFUL DEVELOPMENT PROPOSALS IN THE NEW YORK CITY WATERSHED.

Such groups give Riverkeeper additional 'boots on the ground' and, more importantly, empower citizens to have a say in their own quality of life. One group that has been particularly effective and critical to Riverkeeper's efforts in the watershed is the Concerned Residents of Southeast (CRSE).

CRSE was originally formed in early 1997 by renowned preservationist Eleanor Fitchen, Denis Castelli, and Michael Caputo, and was incorporated with about 20 founding members to oppose a 14-screen cineplex proposed in the Town of Southeast, in the heart of the watershed in Putnam County. By the end of that year, as conflicts over numerous environmental issues persisted, CRSE had 150 'charter' members. Despite continuing approvals for the cineplex project from the Southeast Planning Board, CRSE continued its fight that, together with the NYC Department of Environmental Protection's objections, ultimately stopped the ill-conceived project. The resulting press coverage and membership drive pushed membership to about 550 in 1999.

While continuing to monitor several projects and attend town meetings, CRSE went into a largely dormant period in 1999 until early 2002, when concerns with the proposed Meadows at Deans Corners project caused reactivation of the organization. A meeting of neighbors affected by the Meadows proposal later led to an election of a new CRSE board, participation in two lawsuits against the project, a new intensity of opposition to the legion of harmful development proposals in Southeast, and elevated membership rolls to again exceed 500.

CRSE has now become a highly visible and effective advocate for protecting the natural resources and quality of life in Southeast, and, according to Riverkeeper Watershed Attorney Chris Wilde, a key ally in support of Riverkeeper's mission. "Riverkeeper is fully committed to supporting CRSE's efforts and to helping grow CRSE's membership. Their strong local presence makes our job of defending sensitive watershed resources a lot easier. It would be difficult to respond to the current volume of development proposals in Southeast without CRSE's support."

CRSE's successful advocacy lies in the strength of its leadership,

the breadth of its membership, and the credibility it gains from opposing only projects that threaten the quality of life or environment of Southeast, or that do not otherwise conform to the Town's master plan and vision.

When it first formed, CRSE used as its model a citizen group in North Salem. Today, with several years of experience, the group believes there are several essential components of an effective citizen group, particularly for those fighting misguided development in the watershed. First, gathering information about potential projects by attending town meetings is essential. Second, using communication tools like the Internet, email, and traditional mail to disseminate information and build membership support. Third, cultivating positive working relationships with town officials, the media — and when appropriate, developers — enhances the organization's credibility and avoids unproductive hostility.

According to the organization's president, Rick Feuerman, "The board of CRSE feels that the mission of our group is to keep the public informed about proposals in Southeast. Opposition to any project comes from its neighbors and the surrounding community, not from CRSE. We feel that we offer an invaluable service that is not provided by the press or local officials. This 'information clearing house' produced a loyal and generous membership that continues to grow with each onslaught from sprawl developers."

CRSE believes it is also critical to work in concert with other community and environmental organizations. CRSE's relationship with Riverkeeper was established at the outset of the group's formation. CRSE hosted Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. and then-Riverkeeper John

Cronin at a public event in 1998 to promote *The Riverkeepers* and to support CRSE's fight against local sprawl development. For Riverkeeper, the partnership has grown in importance since that time. CRSE serves as an invaluable resource of information about potentially harmful development projects in Southeast, and is a key ally in lawsuits against wanton developers.

The relationship came full circle last May when Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. again appeared in Southeast at a CRSE event to speak out against the onslaught of sprawl development. CRSE board member Lynne Eckardt says, "CRSE would not be where we are today without Riverkeeper's guidance and support." Riverkeeper looks forward to a continuing alliance with CRSE, and to helping foster the formation of similar citizens' groups throughout the watershed.

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