

Cortlandt law will preserve historic roads

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Like many suburban towns, Cortlandt has been trying to save its rustic character, even as sprawl and new development have transformed its face. A particular concern is the preservation of old stone walls, some of which date to the Revolutionary War.

A law enacted Tuesday by the town would let authorities preserve the historic walls as well as scenic views, the trees and other natural and man-made features when new construction is proposed along certain routes.

The new law follows a regional effort by a number of communities in northern Westchester and Putnam counties to preserve the character of old country roads and walls, a means of connecting the past with the present.

“I’m very interested in preserving history in our community,” Cortlandt Supervisor Linda Puglisi said. “Having a town ordinance for the preservation of historical roads is very important. The area is full of history, and we need to make sure future generations have access to it.”

The law identifies 14 roads that “contribute to the overall scenic, historic, and semi-rural character of the town.” The planning Board and the Building Department would be given explicit power to determine what kind of design changes are allowed to those roads when developers and builders come to Town Hall for new construction.

The goal of the law is to “preserve the character of the roadscapes.”

Among those to be given historic status are Furnace Dock Road, Kings Ferry Road, Albany Post Road, Oregon Road, Gallows Hill Road, Quaker Bridge Road and Teatown Road.

The towns of Bedford and Somers also have enacted laws protecting scenic roads. In other communities, public opposition has arisen whenever old dirt roads are proposed to be paved over, with standing-room-only crowds turning out at public hearings in Philipstown, Patterson and Southeast in the past few years to protest.

Stone walls have become something of an endangered sight in the Northeast. Many have been pilfered out of existence, their stones to be reused in backyard landscaping projects, or crumbled back to the earth after long, hard winters.

Locally, citizens and preservationists are coming together to ensure their protection through groups like the Pound Ridge Stone Wall Rebuilding Club.

A local environmental and civic leader from Cortlandt, Sue McDonnell, said the old stone walls in town need all the protection they can get.

“It’s something long overdue,” she said of the new law. “It’s part of the character of this town, these roads.”

On the other hand, David Simbari, a Cortlandt business advocate who ran for the town office last year, is not enthusiastic about the change.

“It’s more onerous,” he said. “They over-legislate. They’re making it more difficult to develop and build. It’s anti-growth, anti-development.”

“We’ve got so much regulations now, it costs a lot to build in this town anyway,” said Simbari, and unsuccessful candidate for the supervisor’s office who works in the computer software field.

The law is an outgrowth of zoning changes and building restrictions the town administration undertook during a comprehensive review that began in 2007. A consultant identified roads that convey antique flavor and catalogued the location of other historically significant sites.

New York once had 95,364 miles of stone walls, according to an 1871 survey cited by Katonah author Susan Allport. She called them “mysterious works of backbreaking labor, as out of place and evocative as a shipwreck on the ocean floor.”

Stone walls, Allport said, “Speak of how quickly the past is forgotten”