W'CHESTER FOOT-DRAGGING

BY ABBY LUBY SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

WESTCHESTER COUNTY is still dragging its heels on complying with federal orders to desegregate its neighborhoods.

Last week the county was slammed for a second time by the federal government for not having a plan to put more minorities in suburban neighborhoods.

It now has until Aug. 9 to turn in a revised plan spelling out where it will build 750 units of affordable housing, with a federally mandated minimum price tag of \$51.6 million.

Just days after the feds rejected

Blasted by feds for lack of plan to desegregate suburban nabes

Westchester's original plan, the county planning board approved an affordable housing proposal for Rye that removed an age restriction for 18 planned affordable units. The county legislature is expected to vote on the change in September.

In his 61-page report, federal monitor James Johnson noted that the preference for seniors "who reside in the municipality would preserve the demographic status quo, directly cutting against the County's obligation to AFFH, [Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing]."

But changing age requirements for the Rye housing doesn't do much to bring a racial mix in the richest county in the country, said Craig Gurian, director of the Anti-Discrimination Center. The center sued Westchester for failing to use \$50 million in federal funds to develop housing for minorities in mostly white communities.

Gurian contends the county is tiptoeing around the segregation issue.

"This is not just about affordable housing; this is about race.

Westchester is blatantly ignoring the federal order."

Mike Kaplowitz, a Democrat from Somers, said that although the process was slow, some towns were moving forward with plans for affordable housing.

Meetings have been held with municipal officials and private landowners over the last three months, County Executive Robert Astorino said in a statement.

Towns discussing possible affordable housing developments include Larchmont, Yorktown, Dobbs Ferry, Eastchester, Lewisboro, Cortlandt, Irvington, North Salem, Bedford, New Castle, North Castle, Rye Brook, City of Rye, Briarcliff and Pleasantville.

The monitor's report also criticized the county for being vague about how it will enforce the mandate if a town fails to promote affordable housing to desegregate a neighborhood. The county has seven years to comply with ADC's settlement.

"You can build affordable housing and it can either perpetuate or reduce segregation," said Gurian.

"Location matters. The county is still not recognizing that location matters. This is the heart of the matter."

Fostering potential of humble city parks

ew York City parks saved Lee Stuart when she moved here more than two decades ago. Now, as executive director of New Yorkers For Parks, she's trying to return the favor by putting her group at the nexus of public and private

agencies taking care of and creating city

"We have great parks in lots of places," Stuart said. "We have wonderful conservancies, we have public/private partnerships that bring us things like Central Park and Bryant Park and Battery Park, and that is fantastic.

"But there are neighborhood parks which really need the same. They will never have the financial resources behind them, so they just won't have the same draw as a Central Park, or the same real estate.

"So how can we bring the best we can to neighborhood parks? How can we creatively fund them?"

Stuart, 56, holds a doctorate in ecology, has stud-

ied geology in the Grand Canyon and was doing studies on the effect of climate change on the Alaskan tundra way back in the 1970s.

"By the time I was 30, I had spent seven years in a tent," she said. "I loved every minute of it. I got to see some terrific coun-



Lee Stuart of New Yorkers for Parks, shown at Sutton Place Park, says she hopes to help local parks shine. Photo by Andrew Savulich/Daily News

try, and I was outside a long time."

It was her work creating a successful community food distribution network in San Diego that got her invited to start a similar program in the South Bronx.

But she quickly found herself longing to put some green underfoot.

"I was so cultureshocked that I used to sit in the South Bronx and close my eyes and picture the Brooks Range of Alaska, until I could feel myself centered and whole

again in this intense urban environment,"

"Someone told me 'you gotta know where the Botanical Garden is' and drew me a little map of how to get there. They saved me."

Mentored by the late community orga-

nizer Jim Drake, Stuart was involved in many South Bronx movements, including, with the South Bronx Churches and other groups, construction of the Nehemiah housing project, which created 1,000 units of affordable housing in that community.

In her new gig, she plans to put one of Drake's beliefs to practice.

"My cause is to somehow create equity in parks," Stuart said. "Jim Drake taught me that power, the capacity to get things done, is defined in two ways: organized money and organized people.

"What we learned in South Bronx churches is if you do not have the money you better have the people."

Stuart's plan is to put her group at the center of city discussions about the care of the city's 29,000 acres of parkland (that

figure does not include state and federal parks.)

"Our task is seeing how you have the right kind of civil conversation about parks, which has all the voices at the table, has the city's diverse communities represented, that includes the public and private and nonprofit sectors, and sets the stage where you can talk and figure out what is the best outcome for the public good.

"One of our mottoes is 'Great Parks Make Great Cities.' In order to have that apply to more than the name-brand parks, and get more into neighborhood parks, we have to have a different kind of conversation."

For more, see the Web site, www.ny4p.org.

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