Sleepy Hollow's Village Architect, Sean McCarthy

With the full support of Mayor Philip Zegarelli and the Sleepy Hollow Board of Trustees, Sean McCarthy, the Village's recently hired Building Inspector and Village Architect, has begun addressing violations of Sleepy Hollow's zoning codes.

Specifically, Mr. McCarthy is taking a proactive stance by personally visiting homes and apartments in the inner village and throughout its various neighborhoods as well. Complaints that come to his office from residents, or direct calls from police and firefighters have provided him with an array of living situations that are illegal, dangerous to the health and welfare of people or both.

Sean McCarthy was born on Andrews Lane and has been a lifelong resident of the Village. One of ten children, he attended the public grammar schools and went on to Stepinac High School, where he graduated in 1984. He was accepted to the New York Institute of Technology and received his Bachelor of Architect Degree in 1989. Up until accepting the position with the Village of Sleepy Hollow, he had his own architectural firm in Ossining. In February of 2004, he was hired as a consultant by Mayor Zegarelli to revamp the Village's Building Department. Out of that work came the existing Department entitled, "Department of Architecture, Land Use Development, Buildings and Buildings Compliance." By the length of the title it's evident that the new Department is much more comprehensive than what previously existed. "We have a lot going on, particularly with General Motors, Ichabod's Landing, the plans at Phelps Memorial and other projects, so there was definitely a need to expand our responsibilities," he said. One of the responsibilities that have floundered over the past years dealt with overcrowding and illegal occupancy in the inner Village. "We have situations, for example, where a bedroom in a house should only have two people in it due to spatial requirements yet we find four people living in it. In the older houses that have large rooms, people will build a wall right down the center and make two rooms out of one cutting off windows and safe passage. This has created a very dangerous situation because people could be living behind a wall with fire service personnel not knowing they are there. Overall we look at illegal occupancy as a threat to the health and welfare of people and to those entrusted to protect them," Mr. McCarthy said.

The discovery of illegal dwellings can occur through any one of several ways. Neighbors complain, police and fire personnel may uncover situations, excess refuse placed outside buildings may signal too many occupants. Listings that reveal the addresses of students...
attending public schools can also be cross referenced to ensure that the proper number of people are residing in a dwelling according to code.

Besides being a health and safety issue, the owners of illegal and overcrowded dwellings do not pay their fair share of taxes to the Village for the services they use nor do they pay an equitable amount of school tax for the children that attend the public schools. According to School Superintendent Howard Smith the current cost for the education of one student is $18,375 annually and rising. Mr. McCarthy pointed out that he has visited basement apartments without windows where ten people were living. He has found four children at a desk doing homework in an illegal basement apartment and in one instance he actually recognized a child as a classmate of his daughter. "I felt terrible, but there was no way I could allow that apartment to continue with all the safety issues surrounding it," he said. In the not too distant past, according to Mr. McCarthy, a landlord found in violation of New York State Building Codes would be served a citation, appear in court, pay the fine and go back to business as usual. That has all changed in the Village. Now, anyone found in violation will have to teardown and "cease and desist" with illegal apartments within their buildings. Follow-up inspections are standard procedure and at any time suspected violators can receive a visit from the Building Department. This direct approach to code violations is being carried out throughout the Village. Violations have been found in other neighborhoods and the Manors where illegal apartments have been built.

"It's really quite an easy process to do it right, Mr. McCarthy said. Owners can simply visit him on the 3rd floor of Village Hall and ask whether or not what they plan to do with their homes or buildings is legal according to Village Codes. A simple check will either allow or disallow any modifications. If allowed, proper permits can be issued and work can proceed. After completion, if all work is up to code, a Certificate of Occupancy is issued and entered into Village record. Those records will reflect the building's layout for police and fire service personnel and provide for equitable tax assessments.

The Village of Sleepy Hollow is committed to correcting the omissions of past officials and has recently created an Assistant Building Inspector position to aid Mr. McCarthy in his work — work that is paramount to the fiscal stability of the Village, the health and vitality of residents and to those who soon will be.