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Amid Development, A Tiny Piece of the Past

By ROSAMARIA MANCINI

STRIP malls, run-down gas stations and fast-food restaurants with brightly colored signs line Montauk Highway in Mastic, but this busy, densely developed stretch is also home to the Petty House, an 18th-century building now being restored.

Local experts say the severely weathered 700-square-foot Cape Cod-style house, which is hemmed in by commercial development, is the last remaining structure from the 18th century on the stretch of Montauk Highway that runs for about three miles between Carmans River on the east and Barnes Road on the west.

The house is dilapidated. The few remnants of the original clapboard are beaten up, and no glass remains in the windows.

Restoring the building is part of the community's effort to salvage a piece of the past and shine a positive light on the area.

Along with neighboring Mastic Beach and Shirley on the South Shore in the Town of Brookhaven, Mastic has a prime waterfront location but is better known for poor planning, as evidenced by the commercial sprawl and intense residential development.

"There is always more focus on the negative and less-than-stellar aspects of the neighborhood than on the positive," said Carol Bissonette, a member of the Brookhaven Town Council who represents the district that includes the Petty House, "but the restoration will work to showcase our history and remind people that this is a special place."

The building, once a farmhouse for John Petty, a merchant seaman who sailed on trade ships, has been on Ms. Bissonette's radar for 10 years. "To get to the point where the restoration is finally happening is what we all have been waiting for," she said.

In February, Ms. Bissonette, who was on the town's historic district advisory committee before becoming a council member this year, submitted legislation to the town board that would designate the house a historic landmark. She said she would push for the designation once the exterior restoration was completed.

Led by Larry Jones, a preservation consultant with J. Lawrence Jones and Associates of Westhampton Beach, the restoration has been based on studies of mid-18th-century houses and a photograph of the Petty House from about 1950 that was found in the

collection of the Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities. Gentry Construction of Westhampton Beach is doing the restoration work.

The four-room house, which has had a few additions over the years, did not have a foundation; it was set on blocks, bricks and tree stumps. To ensure structural stability, the timber-frame house was lifted, and a foundation was poured last month. Once the foundation has settled, the house will be anchored with hurricane straps, and the restoration of the exterior will begin.

"It's by pure luck that this house lasted this long," Mr. Jones said. "Our main concern is to make a weatherproof, fully restored exterior shell."

The house will be finished with western red cedar shakes, wood clapboard and historically correct doors and windows made of white pine and restored German glass. It will be landscaped, and a proper period fence will be put up. The restoration work will also include two fireplaces and chimneys. Construction should be completed by summer.

Lerner-Heidenberg Properties, a New Jersey developer that has a 50-year lease on the Petty House and owns the Southport Shopping Center that looms over it from behind, provided \$300,000 to pay for the exterior restoration. The community is trying to raise money for the interior work, which Ms. Bissonette estimated would cost another \$300,000.

Lerner-Heidenberg's donation was not a requirement for any approvals by the town, said Ms. Bissonette and Linda U. Margolin, the company's lawyer.

Preservation efforts are growing across Long Island as development claims more of the landscape, said Charla Bolton, preservation advocate at the Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities. "There is an even greater push in neighborhoods where the remaining historic fabric is limited," she said. "They want to stamp and preserve the past any way they can, especially Mastic, where there is very little left."

The Petty House restoration effort has sparked public interest.

"It's not something the residents are used to, and they want to know what's going on, and they are surprised, interested and excited," said Sue Gonzalez, a 20-year Mastic resident, who heads the historical committee of a local group, the William Floyd Community Summit. "They are craving sites like the Petty House."