April 9, 2007

Thomas Heaslip, Chairman
Planning Board
Municipal Building1 Heineman Place
Harrison, NY 10528

Dear Mr. Heaslip:

On behalf of the National Association for Olmsted Parks (NAOP), I am writing to express concern over the development of a tract of land in Harrison worthy of the Planning Board’s consideration. This tract of land, known as Parcel B, was originally part of Ophir Farm at Reid’s Hall. Ophir Farm is a rare surviving example of a 19th century “gentleman’s farm” – a pastoral country estate owned by a successful businessman who hired designers to create an idyllic version of the American farm. In this particular case, the “gentleman’s farm” was owned by Whitelaw Reid. This rural estate was an extraordinary collaboration among several preeminent American designers, including Frederick Law Olmsted who created the landscape design for Ophir Farm. Olmsted was America’s first landscape architect and is best-known for designing New York City’s Central Park.

The larger tract of Ophir Farm, now the campus of Manhattanville College, was recognized many years ago by the National Register of Historic Places and is one of only four such landmarks in Harrison. The fact that this original portion of Ophir Farm has survived for more than a century relatively intact is a distinction for the community. By preserving this remaining parcel, the Harrison Planning Board has an opportunity to leave a legacy that will enrich the lives of future generations, the legacy of a distinctive Olmsted landscape.

The value and significance of Olmsted’s landscape legacy is undisputed. Where these works of art created from nature survive, they are often the character-defining landscape of the community. The designation of the Manhattanville College Historical Walking Tour as part of the New York State Greenway Trail System affirms the value of this historically significant landscape as an important cultural resource for Harrison and for the state of New York.

NAOP, established in 1980, is a coalition of design and preservation professionals, historic property and park managers, scholars, municipal officials, citizen activists and representatives of numerous Olmsted organizations around the United States and Canada. Its primary concern is the legacy of work designed and inspired by Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. and his firm that continued to practice landscape architecture for almost a century through the involvement of his sons John Charles Olmsted and Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. NAOP advances the use of Olmstedian design principles and advocates for the protection of irreplaceable historic parks and landscapes that revitalize communities and enrich people's lives.

It is essential for the continuity of the heritage of Harrison that this important landscape is left to be enjoyed by future residents in the way that Olmsted envisioned.

Sincerely,

Catherine Nagel
Executive Director

cc: Anne Gold, Executive Director, Purchase Environmental Protective Association