

NEW YORK UP CLOSE

One More Skirmish In the Paving Wars

By ALEX MINDLIN

If anyone ever writes a study of New York neighborhood squabbles, it may well include a chapter on the Paving Wars, the decades-old struggle between homeowners who pave over their grassy front yards and those who condemn the practice.

By many accounts, the Paving Wars began in the 1980s, after a rise in car break-ins led property owners to seek parking closer to home. But the practice of paving yards has accelerated as developers tear down old houses, and new landlords seek to skirt the costs of maintaining lawns. The concrete yards are most common in auto-centric neighborhoods with limited street parking, like Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, and Bayside, Queens.

"We do them all the time," said Gregory Fontaine, who works for Gotham Builders, a Bayside contractor. "I would say once a month. Even my parents have done it." Another contractor said it could cost \$1,000 to cover a typical Queens yard in concrete.

Perhaps the most vociferous combatant in the Paving Wars is City Councilman Tony Avella of Queens, who has held news conferences in front of paved yards to attack the practice, which, in his opinion, "makes for the most obnoxious-looking buildings you've ever

seen." Opponents of paving also say the concrete patches lead to flooding, by shunting rainwater into overloaded street sewers rather than absorbing it.

On Monday, the Department of City Planning entered the fray by proposing a zoning change that would require planting on 20 to 50 percent of most front yards, depending on width. The rule, which requires approval by the City Planning Commission and the City Council, would apply to about 70 percent of residential lots, principally in neighborhoods with many one- and two-family houses. In addition, on some lots, parking in front of the house would be prohibited.

The rule would limit future paving but would not require replanting in yards that are currently fully paved.

"The green front yard contributes to community and quality of life," said the city planning director, Amanda Burden, adding that the practice of paving was "creating a cement jungle in these beautiful neighborhoods."

But Mr. Fontaine, the contractor, was unconvinced. "Every solution creates another problem," he said. "This means there'll be more cars on the street. When your daughter has to park her car 16 blocks away because the city won't let her park at home, and then she gets assaulted, is that worth it?"

