

The Priest's Tale:

A PILGRIMAGE TO LEGITIMACY

JEFF GERSON • JCG Fall 1987

THE ROAD TO PERMANENT SITES is paved with good intentions. As garden organizers and green space advocates, we know this to be true. Our experiences as a community gardening organization in a decaying town somewhere east of the Mississippi have provided a few good slaps in the face that we think are worth sharing and pondering.

A few seasons ago, a popular priest asked if we could help make a city-owned vacant lot in his parish into a garden. We said "Sure!", then outlined the necessary steps: cleaning the lot, removing the rubble, bringing in soil and landscape timbers, building a fence, etc. Plus, we said, we'll also need a long-term lease from the city.

"I'll see what I can do," replied our friendly priest. We were confident this man, who reputedly had the consciences of most local politicians wrapped around his collar, could pull off this project.

While we waited to hear about the lease, public works crews did a good deal of site development work, including hauling in a few hundred yards of topsoil.

Word soon came back from City Hall. No long-term lease. The city might need the site back someday - for a parking or maybe in-fill housing. We were indignant. At a hastily called board meeting, we decided to tell the priest, the neighborhood, and city government we weren't interested in investing time and precious resources in a site where without adequate long-term security. It was a difficult decision to make, and we sensed that somehow, someday, we would be hurt by it.

A few months later, we found out how.

When we submitted our annual application for community development funds, the unofficial response filtered back from City Hall:

"No way! Your group embarrassed the city by refusing



to take on the priest's vacant lot. Why should we give you any money?"

The city's vindictiveness caught us by surprise. After all, we had already used community development funds successfully in the past to make other gardens, and felt we deserved more funding. Fortunately, a champion emerged, an influential business executive whose company was key to the city's financial well being. He swayed the hearts and purse strings of local decision-makers by brokering a deal, and the deal was this: We agree to take on the priest's lot with a short-term lease; and in return we'd receive community development funds to use on other permanent sites.

Ouch! We moaned and groaned, and wondered about our image. Had we been tainted for life? After a while, it dawned on us that this was a classic rite of passage. Here we were, in the middle of the unctuous world of local politics, a door we'd been banging on for years!

Hooray!

All we can say to other garden organizers and green space folks is to go ahead and cut your deals. Go chant with the Kiwanis Club and rah rah it up with the Chamber of Commerce. Forget telling them about land trusts, local self-reliance, and the green revolution. Make like Lady Bird Johnson and tell them that you're beautifying America with your gardens and parks. Then, once you've got ten or twelve permanent sites under your belt, go back and tell them what you're really up to. 🐦

Illustration: From Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, William Caxton, printer (1483)