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Our opinion/

Compromise on trees

The people who live there may not like it, but it is a fact that Old Town Road has become a major connecting street between Hylan Boulevard and Richmond Road in Grasmere.

That fact, often ignored in the recent Save the Old Town Sycamores debate, is the key to the debate. It is also the one fact that the neighbors cannot change, no matter how much they wish and hope.

It's an old story that has been repeated many times here on Staten Island. Although Old Town residents may think their problem is unique, it is not. It is, in its simplest terms, a battle pitting protectors of trees against protectors of highways. Or, put another way, it is a battle of progress versus preservation.

Staten Island is not the same borough it was 20 years ago, and so accommodations have had to be made, much to the chagrin of many long-time residents. Housing has been built, sometimes ugly and overcrowded. Sewers have been installed, sometimes posing an inconvenience to nearby homeowners. Shopping centers have been built, sometimes ruining older, more established businesses.

And, of course, streets have had to be widened.

Many of us don't like the changes we have seen here in recent years. As the quantity of life has changed, so has the quality of life, and more often than not we are powerless to do anything about it. It is a frustrating feeling, but a fact, nevertheless. The changes on Staten Island, the burgeoning population and the need for new services, is almost entirely out of our hands.

That is something, like it or not, that the residents of Old Town Road will have to accept. All the picket signs and all the community board meetings in the world will not change the fact that Old Town Road is becoming a heavily travelled street. Whether or not the street is widened, the traffic will come. Under the circumstances, it is better to adapt.

The real question, then, is not whether or not to widen the road, because that is clearly necessary. Rather, the question is whether the two sycamore trees can be saved.

In similar situations elsewhere on the Island, the problem could be more easily resolved by moving the project in question. The Richmond Parkway, for example, did not have to be built on the site for which it was proposed, and it wasn't. The group homes now proposed for Corson's Brook Woods could also be built somewhere else. Move the project, save the trees.

But on Old Town Road, the street is where it is; it can't be moved. Unless property can be taken from the other side of the street, where a now-defunct grocery store stands — and that seems unlikely because of the house adjacent to it — the widening of Old Town Road necessarily means destroying one or both of the trees.

It is regrettable, of course. Anytime we destroy a thing of the past it is regrettable, especially old, beautiful trees, which are becoming scarce commodities on Staten Island. But it is necessary.

The Bureau of Highways now claims it may be able to widen the street and keep one of the two trees. That's not as ideal as preserving both trees, but it is apparently a reasonable compromise. It gives the Bureau of Highways the street it wants and gives the neighbors ones of the two trees they want.

The one-tree compromise may have to be the best solution possible, but, given the unimaginative ways of city bureaucracies, one wonders whether every possible alternative has been explored.