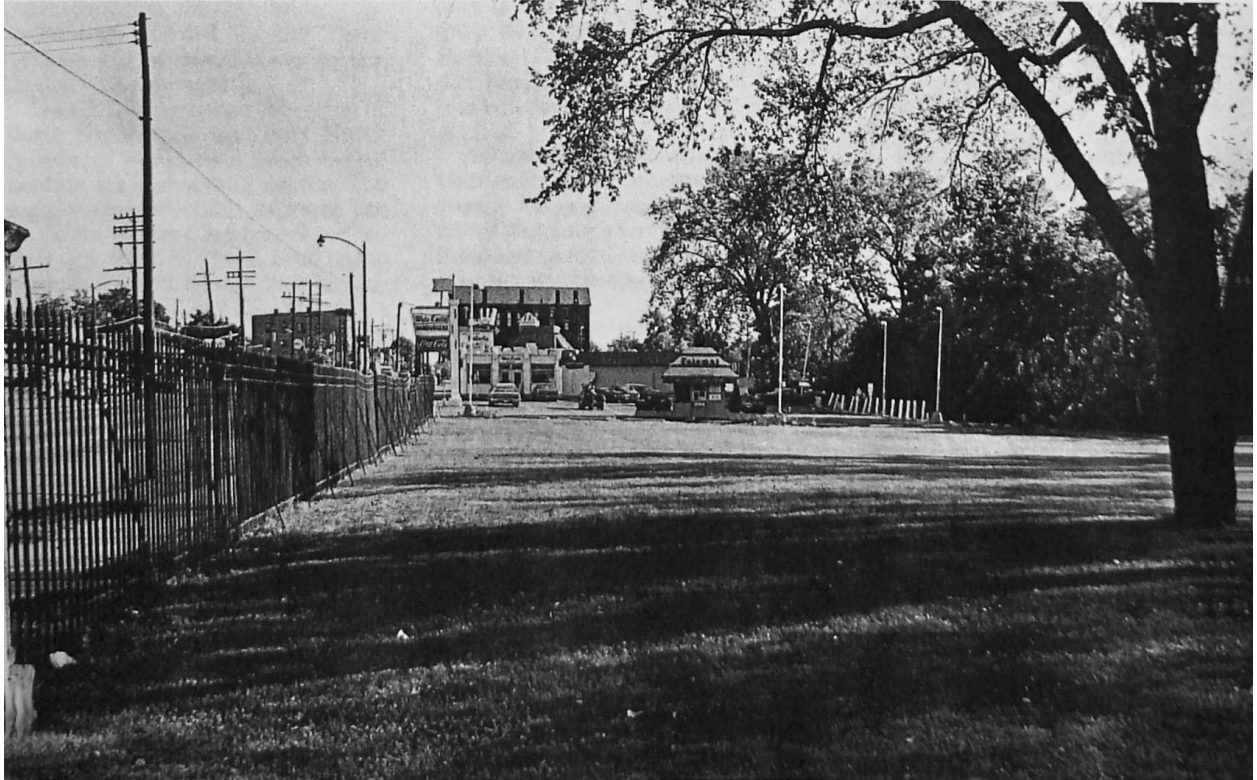


The Saga of Glen Echo Ravine

By John Maher

Columbus Monthly November 1977

Developer Richard Solove announced a year ago that he wanted to build a shopping center complete with Kroger Super Store on the ravine site. Instant brouhaha.



The fence on the left parallels High Street and bounds the LeVeque trust property; in the distance are the Fotomat and the White Castle whose leases run out this year.

“Don’t it always seem to go that you don’t know what you’ve got ‘til it’s gone. They’ve paved Paradise and put up a parking lot. Ooooh, Ooh nan a na.” – “Big Yellow Taxi,” Joni Mitchell.

No one has claimed yet that the westernmost portion of the Glen Echo ravine is really Paradise. The highest praise it has received from someone who wants to save it is that it’s “the most beautiful pieces of natural beauty this side of the Hocking Hills.” And, for the moment, it doesn’t appear that the ravine will be turned into a parking lot.

But then the story of the plan to bulldoze the ravine so it could support the World’s only Georgian-style-replete-with-a-cupola Kroger Super Store is much more intricate than a Joni Mitchell tune. It involves one of Columbus’ choicest parcels of undeveloped land, the futures of the Clintonville and University areas and a series of maneuvers by a developer hoping to placate a plethora of citizen groups. So far the entire city hasn’t been polled to decide whether the ravine really ranks right up there next to Mom and apple pie. But that could still happen.

The turmoil started last November, when developer Richard J. Solove of R. J. Solove and Associates announced plans to construct a shopping center featuring a Kroger Super Store just north of North Street on the west side of North High Street, precisely on the border between the southern edge of Clintonville and the northern edge of the University District.

Solove's proposal almost instantly involved him and several neighborhood organizations in a classic "build vs. no-build" confrontation, with every viewpoint from libertarian to environmentalist popping up at one public meeting or another. More than 10 months later, the future of Glen Echo ravine remained unresolved, and the opposing factions seemed no closer than they ever were.

Solove, an experienced developer, lists among his credits similar Kroger set-ups in Whitehall and Grove City. But experience did not prepare him for the problems he was to encounter at this particular site – problems that would leave him muttering, "I've encountered opposition before. I'm not a virgin in that respect. But I've never, never, seen people so fanatical."

Solove's preliminary plans outlined a \$4 million shopping center called Olentangy Plaza that would have 553 parking spaces. The center would be based around a 56,000-square-foot Kroger Super Store. It would also contain an unnamed drive-in bank of 3,600 square feet, an unnamed family restaurant of 5,000 square feet, and a block of 24,000 square feet for boutique-type stores.

The center was ticketed for an 11.22-acre tract, part of the LeVeque trust established under the will of Leslie L. and Elsa W. LeVeque and administered since 1947 by the Ohio National Bank. The bank also administers most of the acreage north to Tulane Road, including spread-out scenic and sedate Olentangy Village. Currently much of the land is undeveloped. A bank official said there have been various commercial proposals, but none seemed to be the best way to utilize the land and protect the trust's Olentangy Village investment. So the ravine and the surrounding area have remained a kind of buffer zone.

Both the people who want to save its natural beauty and the developer who calls it a health hazard point to the ravine itself as a concrete irrefutable proof of their respective arguments.

The disputed area is the western most part of the Glen Echo ravine which runs from the railroad tracks just east of North Fourth Street to the Olentangy River. Near North Fourth Street the ravine is large enough to contain a small park that has some picnic tables and playground equipment. As the ravine runs westward it passes both North High School and Crestview Elementary School. It also narrows so that the only level area is the dried up creek bed at the bottom. At High Street, the ravine ends in an enormous steep concrete drainage trough that sports the best and most colorful skateboard graffiti in the city. Much of the section east of High Street belongs to the city.

The ravine is interrupted by high street and then resumes and runs west to the Olentangy River. This is the section owned by the LeVeque trust. "No trespassing" signs hang from the tall, spiked, green wrought-iron fence that borders the property.

The ravine on the LeVeque property is about 40 feet deep and lined with twisting trees that are sometimes cloaked in hanging vines. The vegetation is so lush that the sun has trouble highlighting the small stream that bisects the ravine and trickles towards the Olentangy.

But on the north side of the ravine there is a large pile of brick and concrete rubble that is gradually finding its way down the slope. Some cabinets and a doorless refrigerator are rusting in the underbrush. A culvert sprouts drainage water. From an open, cone-like structure the smell of sewage is often distressingly noticeable. Solove and others say that after a heavy rain the stream carries sewage and manhole covers pop off.

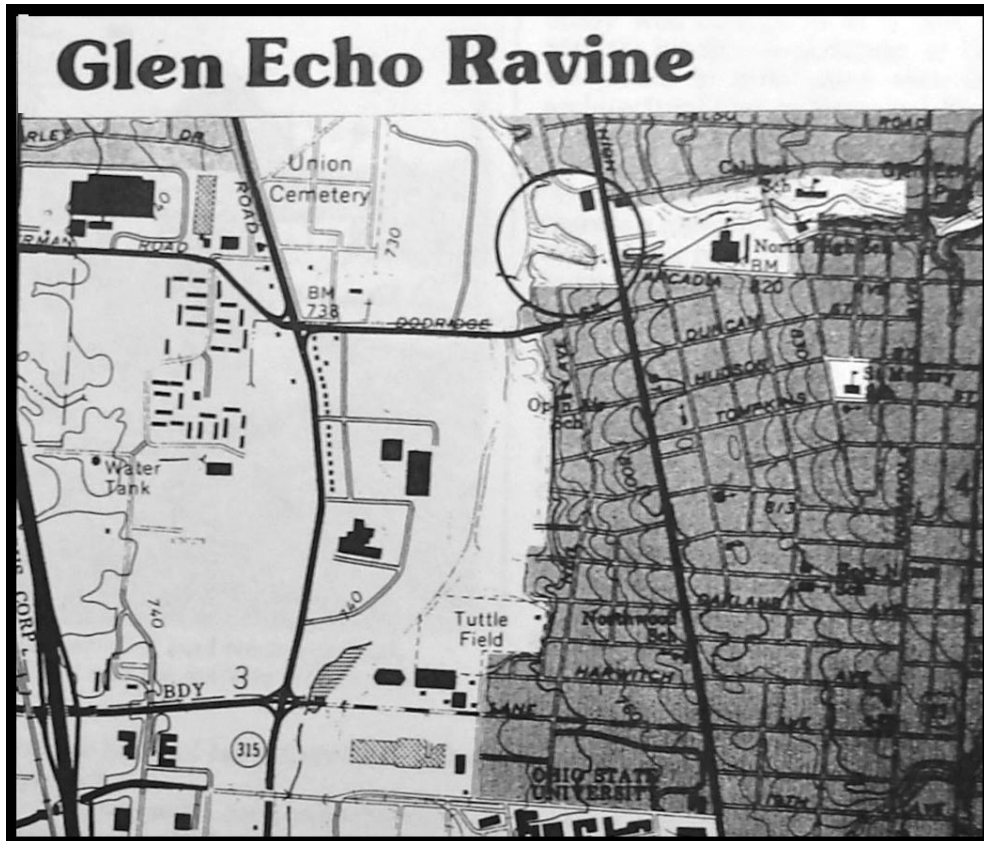
The Glen Echo, Overbrook and Walhalla ravines are the most outstanding topographical features of Clintonville. A recent Clintonville Economic Development Study warned that "If present land use trends continue, the outstanding opportunities afforded by the Three Ravines will be lost forever to the Clintonville community."

The CEDS suggested the corner of North High Street and East North Broadway would be a much better location for a shopping center. The suggestion predictably brought the residents of *that* neighborhood to their feet. Ruth Sparrow, head of the recently formed East North Broadway Association, says the group has no intention of allowing a shopping center to be built on the site.

Mike Haviland, a University-area planner who lives on Glen Echo ravine, says, "As a planner, you love flat land, just love it. You can put in ball diamonds, tennis courts, you name it. But ravines are

a different story. You can spend \$100,000 and it doesn't look like you've done anything." Haviland has been active in securing funds to upgrade the ravine.

The law of gravity is the big reason ravines are so tough to maintain. To keep ravine banks from wearing away, costly erosion-preventing devices such as retaining walls must be built. Besides soil, old retaining walls and usual bits of rubble tend to find their way to the bottom of a ravine. (Glen Echo ravine is apparently where old Kroger shopping carts go to die.) Pipes and culverts also need maintenance, and the steep slopes of a ravine make work harder and costlier. Recently a consultant concluded that it would take \$600,000 to do a complete restoration job on the city's part of the Glen Echo ravine. But only \$140,000 was available in Federal Community Development Act funds, and almost all of it was immediately earmarked for erosion control.



At an April 20 meeting, the University Area Commission kicked around ideas about how it could get more CDA funds for the ravine. Then it turned to new business...developer Solove's proposal.

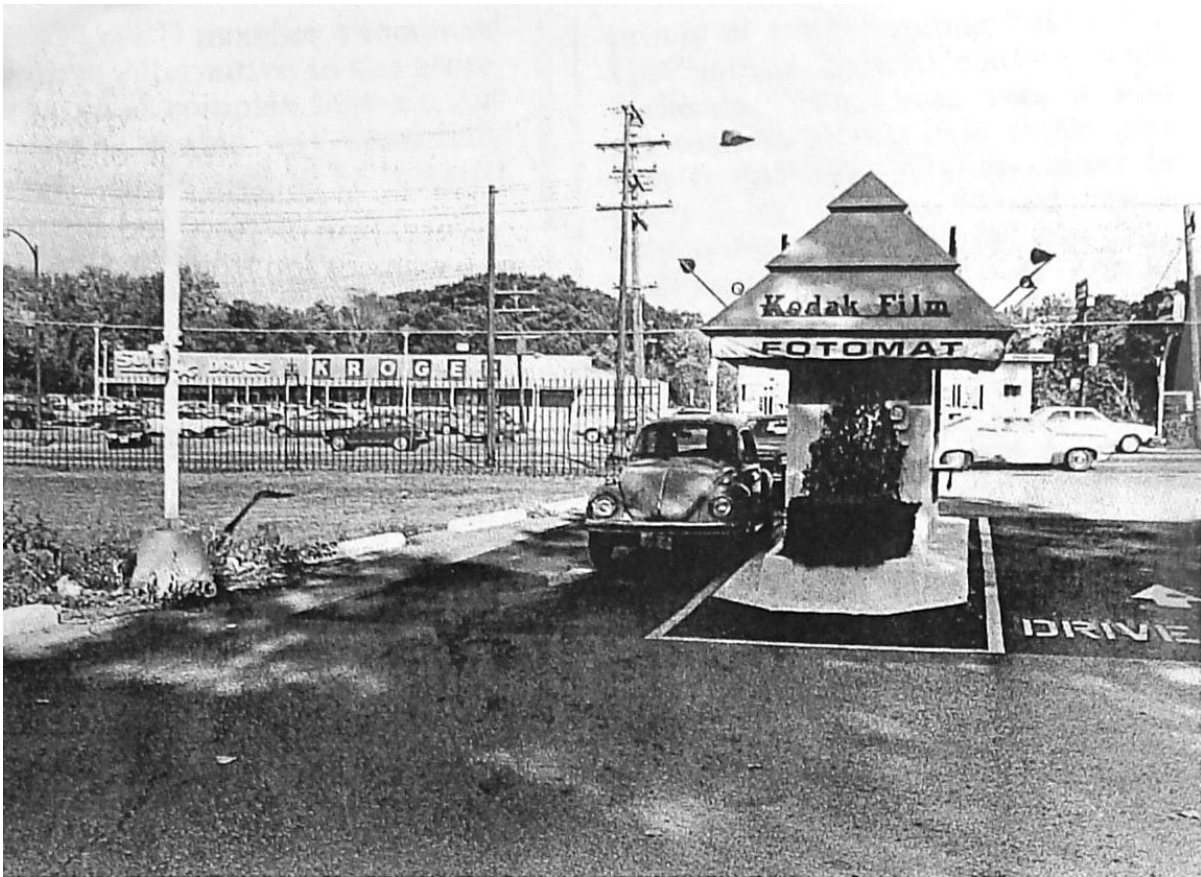
Currently a White Castle, built in 1929, and a Fotomat are camped on the shallow strip that borders the ravine along High Street. But their lease runs out at the end of the year, and Solove's plans were to tear them down and fill in most of the ravine behind them.

The strip that holds the burger-server and the film developer is zoned commercial (C-4), but the ravine and the surrounding green area are zoned for apartments and houses (R-4 and AR-1). The construction of a shopping center requires a zoning change. City Council, after considering the recommendations of the Department of Development, handles that chore. But both can be influenced by the recommendations of area commissions. Since Glen Echo ravine is the boundary between Clintonville and the University area, both the Clintonville Area Commission (CAC) and the University Area Commission (UAC) became involved.

Solve went before the 10-member CAC Nov. 4, 1976, with his then sketchy plans. The members listened and invited him to come back with more detailed plans. More than six months later, after several public hearings and meetings, they would again extend the same invitation. As Solove says, “They don’t commit themselves.”

But other groups did. Almost immediately after the November CAC meeting, Clintonville residents Grace Thompson, an art teacher, and Jay Zenitsky, a city planner, organized the Clintonville Organization for Reasonable Economic Development (CO-RED). They were appalled and annoyed that the project would fill in – and destroy forever – the ravine.

Solove urged skeptics to take a look at his other developments since “I have a beautiful portfolio.” But Thompson says, “I’m sure they [the developments] are adequate, but they’re nothing to rave about. Mr. Solove builds on flat land, that’s what he does. So his solution was to make another piece of flat land and build on that, certainly nothing very creative. The ravine is unique, there’s no reason to build another million-of-them –if-there-is-one-of-them shopping center there.”



The Fotomat on the strip of the LeVeque trust-controlled land bordering High Street, looking towards the east side of High Street and the existing Kroger store.

Co-RED volunteers working door-to-door in the University and Clintonville areas gathered more than 2,000 signatures opposing the construction of the center.

But some people question whether the signers really understood the issue. Haviland says the petition “made it sound like it was a choice between having a ravine or a shopping center. Well, naturally, everyone is going to choose the ravine. It’s like voting for Mom or apple pie. But no one uses the ravine now. It’s private land. And it’s going to be developed. It’s a question of how.

Haviland has promoted development of a bike trail through the shopping center and Olentangy Village – one of the many alterations and clarifications that were to emerge during Solove’s lengthy

attempt to win citizen support. Solove estimates he met with the CAC or its ad hoc committee “eight or nine times,” and the repeated com-back-and try-again procedure forced him to delay meetings with the Department of Development “two or three times.”

Solove also took his plans before the University Area Commission (UAC), which was created by City Council in 1972 to deal with University problems and is a rather loose amalgamation whose meetings are sometimes attended by less than 50 per cent of the commissioners – the number required for a quorum.

There were 10 present and four absent last April 20, when Solove went before the UAC to explain his project and ask for approval of a C-4 zoning. His presentation was a public hearing and CO-RED and NORO-RED brought 30 advocates. NORO RED is a university-area group spearheaded by Virginia Matchett, who lives right across the street from the disputed area and who was later elected to the UAC on the basis of her opposition to the project.

Solove gave a cool, crisp presentation that one observer says “would have impressed a bank,” and with his three-piece suit and built-in reserve, a less formal onlooker says, he “looked like someone you wanted to be against.” With just a few exceptions, those that had crowded into the lounge of ST. Stephen’s Church were quite vocal in their opposition.

The points seized by those opposed to the store were that the store simply wasn’t needed, that the increased traffic would overload an already congested High Street and that the lights and the protective mounding would not adequately shield nearby residents from the 24-hour noise and lights. Some worried that the Super Store would replace, rather than be in addition to, the Kroger stores already serving the University area. Others thought that the shopping center would hurt the small businesses located in the area. And almost everyone was amazed that Kroger had selected a site directly across the street from a store already in operation. They wondered whether the existing store couldn’t simply be enlarged and improved. They wondered what would become of the present store. Others argued that the proposal violated a heretofore obscure document known as the Franklin County Watercourse Plan, a study that recommends that the city acquire and develop for recreation the land around major rivers and streams.

Moreover, opponents pointed out, the proposed center went against the planned development outlined in the recently – completed Clintonville Economic Development Study. The study was completed at a cost of \$50,000 by the Department of Development in association with the architectural firm of Trott and Bean and with the cooperation from the CAC. Released in March, it notes that “Even as this report is being written, there is a major commercial development being proposed that would fill in and thus destroy the Glen Echo ravine.” The plan suggests the disputed area be acquired by the city for a gateway or portal park that “would visually announce to the passer by that this is the entrance to attractive Clintonville.” Curiously, this study contradicts a 1974 study for the University area that projects commercial use for the same tract of land.

At the UAC meeting, Solove had put forth most of the arguments for the store himself. There were only a few people at the hearing who wanted the store. “People who want shopping centers don’t go to meetings,” he says.

After a marathon three-hour session, Solove’s proposal was voted down by the commissioners 5-4, with one abstention. But after the meeting, Solove recalls, he was approached by Wayne Schlegel, an architect and CAC member who had been in the audience. “He said, ‘You know, Dick, a lot of what people are worried about could be corrected if you ask for a zoning of PCD [Planned Commercial Development]. I said, “That’s a great idea.””

PCD differs from Commercial mainly in that the plans presented and agreed upon become part of the zoning ordinance and can be legally enforced. Solove had not had to use it in any of his previous developments.

On May 18, Solove again come before the UAC, this time requesting PCD zoning. Again a crowd of about 40 had gathered, many stimulated by a Matchett flyer that urged them to show up and

be vocal. This time there was discussion on whether Solove should even be heard, since the plans were essentially the same as those presented at the last meeting.

Given his chance, Solove loosened up his presentation a little bit in an attempt to refute the argument that the ravine was such a scenic spot. He brought along glossy photos to show that the ravine is a “health hazard.”

“They were real beauties,” Thompson recalls. “They were close-ups and about one-third of the pictures would be a piece of toilet paper or something like that.”

There were charges from the opposition that the pictures were a fraud. And a CO-RED member announced that, as an alternative to the store, an apartment complex that did not destroy the ravine was financially feasible. Details were to be released later.

But this time the commissioners saw it Solove’s way and voted 5-2 with two abstentions to accept the proposal. The vote might have been closer, but two commissioners who had opposed the original plan had in the meantime married and weren’t around for this vote.

With a favorable UAC vote in his briefcase, Solove, who had been trying to incorporate some of the suggestions of the CAC ad hoc committee into his plans, decided it was time to go before the commission for a vote. In more than six months since he had introduced his outline, the plan had undergone a number of modifications:

- The zoning request had been changed from C-4 to PCD.
- A scenic easement along the banks of the Olentangy was to be granted.
- A bike path through the development and Olentangy Village was to be allowed and all of it was to be constructed at the developer’s and the trust’s expense. This represented a substantial compromise for the LeVeque trust managers, who had previously refused even to consider a bike path.
- The Kroger Super Store and the other stores in Olentangy Plaza were designed in a Georgian style similar to that used in Olentangy Village.
- Other existing buildings on the land controlled by the trust, including a Pizza Hut, were to acquire the same façade.
- The strip on High Street was to be mounded and planted with London plane trees.
- For scenic purposes, the parking lot was reduced from 553 to 511 spaces.
- Six-foot high mounding, planted with trees, would surround the parking lot to hide it from view.
- There would be only one sign on High Street. The rest would lie flat on the buildings.
- High-pressure sodium light would be installed to reduce glare.

Solove estimates that these and other changes would add 41 million to the original price tag. But he was still going to spend more than \$500,000 to fill in about three fourths of the ravine, and to his opponents the improvements were still “doodads and window dressing.”

Solove took his request for approval of a PCD zoning before the CAC in June. The CAC can be a tough audience. “Sometimes people who are experts in one field think that they’re qualified to be experts in every field,” he says. “You’d expect that in the University area. But Clintonville is much worse. Some of those people have such egos. . . . This little gray-haired lady, I don’t know her name, jumped up and made a motion to vote on my proposal before I had a chance to speak. She said she didn’t need to hear what I had to say because she was going to vote against it anyway. And the person next to her seconded it. The rest voted down the proposal, but I thought to myself, ‘My God, don’t I have a right to be heard?’”

The CAC turned down Solove’s zoning proposal. But just as it had in November, it invited him back when he had more definite plans, more detailed architectural drawings. Solove says that this is “putting the cart before the horse, and argues that the drawings would cost him more thousands of

dollars that he is unwilling to spend on just a proposal. Although he first agreed to come back, later in June Solove tabled his proposal, citing financial problems.

He says neighborhood demands were part of the problem, and that Kroger, the anchor of the project, has been ready to bail out at times.

Solove has until the end of the year to reopen his proposal with the CAC. Some think his withdrawal was just a scare tactic to try to make the CAC more manageable. But as Matchett puts it, the opposition is “ever watchful.” In the event that the rezoning is ever approved by the CAC and the City Council, the opponents have already contacted lawyer Karen Blackwell to draw up a referendum to block the rezoning. Getting the referendum on a ballot would require gathering about 7,000 signatures in 30 days.

Will the proposal be re-opened? In mid-August, Solove said he’d know by Sept. 1. In September, he said he’d know in October. (In mid-summer, Solove had admitted, “You know, I’ve kind of lost my enthusiasm.”) And a spokesman for the trust says, “Who knows, the lot might be vacant for another 20 years.”

Which, if a recent survey by CAC is accurate, apparently wouldn’t bother most Clintonville residents a bit. Of those who had heard of Solove’s proposal, 60 per cent said they opposed it. □