

LIFE INSURANCE GIANT KEEPS PROMISE TO LATE CHAIRMAN WITH PARK-LIKE HOUSING IN NYC



Being selected as one of the ten best landlords in New York City by a major newspaper should be proof enough of good property management. The fact that 11,000 people are waiting an average of five years to become a resident of its apartment complexes clinches it.

Metropolitan Life Insurance Company's Peter Cooper Village and Stuyvesant Town make up an 80 acre oasis in the lower east side of Manhattan. Residents there find refuge from the noisy streets and constant hustle of New York City, while paying very reasonable rent and being close to their jobs. Moderately-priced apartments in park-like settings near urban centers was the idea of former Metropolitan Chairman Frederick H. Ecker. With his urging Metropolitan built large apartment complexes in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Alexandria, VA, and New York City in the 30's and 40's. Metropolitan has since sold all but the two in New York City.

Bob Mero, a graduate horticulturist from Virginia, joined Ecker's housing group in 1947 as superintendent of grounds operations at Metropolitan's Riverton apartments in upper Manhattan. While he was at Riverton, Metropolitan started demolition of 80 acres of tenement housing in lower Manhattan. It amounted to privately-funded urban renewal. The area, known as the Gas House District had also been the storage area for oil companies in Manhattan. As a result, the soil was saturated with oil.

The landscape of Peter Cooper Village and Stuyvesant Town became Mero's responsibility in 1973. The two complexes include 64 wooded acres spread between 110 buildings containing 11,250 apartments. There are 26 acres of turf, 9 acres of groundcover and hedges, and 25 acres of pavement and sidewalks. Fifteen playgrounds are



Robert Mero (top) has managed Metropolitan's 80-acre complex since 1973. Park-like central oval of Stuyvesant Town (bottom).

distributed throughout the two complexes.

The contrast may be hard to imagine if you've never experienced New York City. You might expect all residential areas to have tree-lined walks, parks with fountains, squirrels racing from tree to tree and birds singing. In New York City, such an environment is hard to find at any price. Furthermore, Metropolitan has kept its promise to former chairman Ecker by keeping rents far below the norm.

Mero has a maintenance staff of 40 union workers under a contract with National Cleaning Corp. All 40 work full-time, year-round for Metropolitan. Mero's grounds and garden supervisor Marty Mirione is the immediate supervisor of landscaping.

The original oil-soaked topsoil was removed and replaced before planting began. Much of the green area is above parking garages. Landscape architects Clark, Rapuno, and Holleran specified five major trees, five minor trees, four types of hedge plants, four types of vines, four types of groundcover, and 16 types of shrubs. The plant list reads like a nursery catalog: 600 *Platanus orientalis*, 500 *Quercus palustris*, 320 *Gleditsia triacanthos*, and 250 *Liquidambar styraciflua*. Magnolias, crabapples, cherry trees, *Crataegus*, and viburnum are the underlayer of trees. *Azalea*, hollies, *Leucothoe*, *Pieris*, *Rhododendron*, and *Pyracantha* surround displays of annuals and bulbs. Twentyfive acres of bluegrass, ryegrass, and fescue struggle to survive in the heavy shade and foot traffic of the 30,000 residents.

Mero's staff uses six Lockes, one Yazoo, and a dozen Bobcat trim mowers to keep the turf in shape. Fertilizer (10-6-4) is applied every June and November. Mero uses Tupersan for a preemergence weed control and an Adikes' blend for postemergence control. He has had a particular problem with purple oxalis in areas with southwest exposure. He also has an occasional infestation of chinchbugs and grubs for which he now uses Oftanol. The turf remains green throughout the winter since the



Overhead view of Peter Cooper Village and Stuyvesant Town.

outer row of buildings blocks the wind and the heat loss from the 110 buildings keeps the internal park areas above freezing most of the winter. The crew overseeds with Manhattan in the spring and NK 200 in the fall.

Mero relies heavily on Weed-eaters for trim. A five-acre strip of Belgium block is treated with Roundup when necessary. The central oval of the complex is irrigated.

Tree and shrub pruning is performed by a few trained members of the crew. Many lower branches of the plane trees have been removed for lack of light. The plane trees have also had problems with the tussock moth. The oaks have had occasional infestations of black aphids and the locusts have had red spider. Mero uses malathion and Sevin for tree spraying.

Residents of the complex take an active interest in the work done by the crew. One resident calls the local office of the Environmental Protection Agency every time she sees a spray unit. Efforts to reduce squirrel damage to the trees have also resulted in charges of cruelty. Havahart live traps, the most humane control available, are the only thing used for trapping squir-

rels. Residents have also prevented some of the pruning needed to help the turf survive. Mero feels only an owner-managed staff could really work with the residents while maintaining good will for Metropolitan.

Malavese in Hicksville, Long Island is Mero's primary supplier of equipment. Adikes and Wagner Seed provide seed and chemicals.

Bicycles and Cushman trucksters enable the crew to get around the 80 acre site quickly. Supervisors are in radio contact with the office at all times.

After 35 years with Metropolitan, Mero, an avid golfer and hunter, is retiring. His boss, Jack Velleman, an assistant vice president, has worked with Mero for most of those years. The change of guard will not be an easy one. A new manager with his own ideas might upset the careful balance between Metropolitan and the residents. The situation is being studied carefully by Staff Assistant Robert Morgan for Vice Presidents Charles Cunneen and Fred Wortman. Metropolitan continues to treat quality housing for the middle class as a prime responsibility.

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