

Downtown Merchants Clarify Stance on Mahackeno Y

The following questions and answers are provided, at the suggestion of the Westport Downtown Merchants Association (WDMA), to clarify its views of the issue of a new YMCA facility at Mahackeno. The *Westport News* previously published an opinion piece by the WDMA on the subject of the new Y but the WDMA felt its views had been misconstrued in some quarters. As with our other Q&As on this subject, the paper posed the questions and WDMA was given as much time as they needed to respond.

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Q. How does the WDMA feel about the decision of the Westport Weston Family Y to move out of the downtown area to Mahackeno?

A. It is still the preference of the WDMA to have the Y located in the downtown area, as we publicly stated in 1999, and most recently in the fall of 2005. That said, we have come to realize that the YMCA appears to have exhausted all efforts to remain in the downtown area and therefore we support their proposed move to Mahackeno and hope it allows them to serve their members properly, now and in the future. We do support their right as a property owner to determine the best use of their own property, subject to the local zoning board's approval of such a decision. If town approvals are given for this move, we hope the transition to the new facility happens quickly, so that the

proper redevelopment of the current Y building can happen quickly and efficiently, causing as little transitional problems for the downtown as possible.

Q. What do you think will become of the existing facility?

A. The goal of the WDMA is to help our merchants grow and prosper in a difficult and competitive retail environment. The redeveloped YMCA building at 59 Post Road East will become a new anchor, adding new vibrancy and excitement to the Main Street area. We are confident that the character and architectural importance of this property will remain (thanks to the protective measures taken by the town to limit façade changes), while adding a combination of boutique retail, restaurants, possibly residential housing and hopefully a theater, as well as other mixed uses to complement the current successes of the downtown area.

Q. Do you think the YMCA's move will have significant effect on the downtown?

A. Yes. There will likely be a significant *positive* long-term effect for both the downtown and the town as a whole. Once the initial construction phase is done, which could take a couple of years, there ought to be a much greater benefit to our merchants. More variety of shops, restaurants, housing and theater, etc., will mean more general activity in downtown, especially at night, and greater sales possibilities for our merchants. This should translate into more sales tax revenue to the state, and greater property taxes from a new development to the town, since the Y currently

pays no tax for that property. Over the years, people have asked, "Why fix something that isn't broken." It may not be broken, but like all of our homes, we must maintain and improve upon our properties, to assure they yield the best value, especially in a competitive retail environment, as we are in. This is the basis of the WDMA Downtown Plan, a plan we are still trying to implement and hope to present to the town in the near future. The redevelopment of the Y's property at 59 Post Road East will add to that plan, keeping Westport a premier shopping and entertainment center for many years to come.

Q. What do you think will happen if the Y is not successful in making the move to Mahackeno?

A. It will likely mean that the Y will continue to lose members, since it is not cost-efficient to continue to maintain and keep up the current Y with band-aids, and it will continue to physically deteriorate, which would be a shame to see happen to such a beautiful property. Any benefits to our merchants will likely erode as well, as there membership erodes. If the Y plans do not go forward, the Y might ultimately have to close. This would be a blow, not only to the downtown merchants, but to the town as a whole.

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