

The Westport Weston Family Y Goes on the Record . . . Again.

In a recent *Westport News* op-ed piece, the Westport Weston Family Y was characterized unfairly as “becoming disliked and unwelcome to a major part of the community.” With this statement, it would seem the writer is engaging in a bit of hyperbole.

We realize there have been, are and will be individuals who question or oppose decisions made by elected officials, businesses, and organizations – presuming to have greater insight and better solutions. Recognizing this, we fully expect there will be those who, for a variety of reasons and with best intentions, will criticize the proposed Family Y facility at Mahackeno, as has been done with any other location we have considered in the past.

However, when such criticism is based on incomplete or erroneous information, or is purported to be buttressed by what amounts to the misstatement or distortion of facts, we are obliged to set the record straight.

A Long-Awaited Solution. The Management and Directors of the Family Y have spent more than a decade working on a viable solution for a new facility. We have considered and researched more than 30 sites – including the Baldwin Parking Lot, Baron’s South, Bayberry Lane, Imperial Avenue, the Jaeger Property, Norden Park, Nyala Farms, the Police Barracks, and Winslow Park. We have expended significant sums to determine whether many of those sites would be feasible. We have calculated the financials for and community impact of many alternatives including a renovation to the existing facility. As a result of this due diligence, it was determined that our property at Mahackeno is not only the best option, but it is also the only reasonable option.

And so, it was recommended that the Family Y begin exploration and development of plans for a proposed facility at Mahackeno. Following approval of that recommendation by the Board in 2003, considerable planning and thoughtful deliberation has been given to this matter.

Engaging the Community. Over the past year, the Family Y has held a number of forums about our proposed plans for Mahackeno. We have met with community leaders,

influencers, and citizens – including the Westport Downtown Merchants’ Association, the Weston Kiwanis, the Y’s Men and the Y’s Women, the Westport Women’s League, the First Selectman of Weston, the Westport Rotary clubs, the Westport/Weston Chamber of Commerce, the families of Mahackeno campers, and the past and current First and Second Selectmen of Westport.

One of these forums was held at the request of the Y Downtown group, which contacted the president of our Board and expressed an interest in reviewing our plans for Mahackeno. It is this meeting to which the writer referred in his op-ed.

Stating the Facts. The writer’s contention that the forum was “the first news” he had that the time was past to revisit options for relocation is surprising. The Family Y has been focused solely on proposed development of a new facility at Mahackeno for two years and has promoted that fact in word and deed, including a number of Op-Ed articles and columns and, most recently, a Page Three interview in the October 14 issue of the *Westport News*.

The writer’s contention that the reasons for rejecting other locations are “superficial” is refuted by the facts. A decision by Town authorities precludes the sale or lease of municipal property to private concerns (Baron’s South). The zoning designation of one property as “Dedicated Open Space and Recreation District #1” precludes development for housing or commercial purposes (Winslow Park). Given our reliance on membership fees and contributions, the additional cost associated with the purchase of property cannot be borne by the Family Y (Pepperidge Farm, Westport Corporate Park, State Police Barracks, Baldwin Parking Lot). Contamination and environmental challenges of another property recommends against locating a community facility on the site (Imperial Avenue). The size of many of these other properties is inadequate for our building and parking needs (Town Police Barracks, Imperial Avenue).

The writer’s contention that we will be able to “squeeze...through the legal loopholes” is not our expectation given the extensive permitting process of various state and local regulatory bodies – including the Connecticut Departments of Environmental Protection and Transportation, the Flood and Erosion Control Board, the Architectural Review Board, the Conservation Commission, and Planning and Zoning – to which our plans are subject. It is our

expectation that, as a private property owner with the right to petition for the Special Permit which is needed regardless of where we relocate in Westport, our submissions to the land use boards will be considered without prejudice.

The writer's contention that we are affecting a "note of entitlement and a posture of arrogance" ignores the fact that we have demonstrated the utmost care and concern during this process – from working to position the building to limit its view from neighboring homes and adjacent roadways to designing a building with architectural details that complement the existing landscape. It fails to consider the fact that we are committed to proceeding in a responsible manner and, to that end, have engaged paid consultants to study potential impacts related to the environment, sanitary requirements, and traffic. It dismisses the fact that we are making every effort to address those issues within our control and have already begun developing plans for on-site sewage treatment, installation of smart signalization traffic lights, and a dedicated traffic lane to handle vehicle flow. And, we plan to restrict access through our Rice's Lane entrance to all but emergency vehicles once construction is completed.

The writer's contention that we "will gain only 17,000 square feet" in the proposed facility is inaccurate. Only 65,000 square feet of our current facility is usable for programs and activities so we will, in fact, gain over 30,000 square feet of usable space. Further, the proposed facility offers numerous enhancements including expanded Childcare that will no longer be housed below ground and will have a contiguous outdoor play area, ADA-compliant accessibility, opportunity for outdoor activity, improved safety and security, and integration with the Camp.

The writer's contention that many of our funding sources "may well be in jeopardy" and that we will face "well-funded legal opposition" hints at a reaction which is far beyond any anticipated response to our plans for a Family Y facility to serve the people of Westport, Weston and surrounding communities for the next 50 to 100 years.

Caring, Honesty, Respect and Responsibility. As citizens of our community and members of the governing boards, we understand fully our responsibility to the Family Y and, by extension, the larger community. Working with the Management and Staff of this venerable

institution, we offer our time, talent and resources to ensure the Family Y will be able to deliver varied and year-round programming and services to our community.

The decision to plan the proposed facility at Mahackeno was not made in haste. It was made with considerable reflection and deliberation. Nor are we proceeding without regard for our neighbors, our members, our supporters, or our responsibility as a Family Y.

Despite the writer's stated intentions, forcing us to defend against allegations and innuendo does not benefit the community. It only serves to divert our attention from the larger issues: the requirements of planning a facility to optimal conditions and standards, the desire to build a facility which will enhance the appeal of the surrounding neighborhood and our community as a whole, and our obligation to provide a high level of service to meet the needs of a growing and changing community.

The Westport Weston Family Y has served the community for more than eight decades. Our Sports and Rec gymnastics program has enabled youngsters to compete at the national level. The staff of our Aquatics Department has taught thousands of children to swim. Our Childcare program, accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, provides early care and education for children 6 weeks to 6 years old. Accredited by the American Camping Association, Camp Mahackeno has been the place to revel in outdoor summer fun for thousands of children and the School-Age program runs after-school activities in the Westport schools. As well, our commitment to the health and well-being of the adults and senior citizens in our community remains undiminished.

Our goal in advancing the proposed facility at Mahackeno is to continue our tradition of serving the greater good. The community expects nothing less from their Family Y.

As we endeavor to make good on that promise, we believe the people of the community will continue to support our efforts on their behalf.

Rosemary E. Halstead
President, Board of Directors

Allen A. Raymond
Chair, Board of Trustees