

**Text of Remarks by Iain H. Bruce
President, Board of Directors
Westport Weston Family Y
to the
Planning & Zoning Commission
March 13, 2008**

Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen. I am Iain Bruce, I live at 9 Winding Lane, and I have lived in Westport since 1989. I have the honor to be the President of the volunteer Board of Directors of the Westport Weston Family Y.

Today is a great day for Westport. It is my distinct pleasure, with great pride, on behalf of the 44 volunteer members of the Board of Directors and the Board of Trustees of the Westport Weston Family Y, the 283 members of our dedicated staff, our hundreds of volunteers, and our 6,000 members, to present to you our application for a Special Permit for our new full-service Y on our property adjacent to the Merritt Parkway on Route 33.

The Long Journey to Mahackeno – Our application is the culmination of 13 years of work by well over 100 volunteers, all of our senior staff members, and a number of highly skilled professional consultants in such disparate fields as architecture, engineering, traffic, law, horticulture, biology, land use, archaeology and more. As you know from the extensive paperwork before you, our application has already received the necessary approvals from the State Department of Environmental Protection, the Westport Flood and Erosion Control Board, and the Westport Conservation Commission, and these approvals have been upheld on appeal, twice by the DEP and once by Westport’s own RTM.

Before I turn the podium over to our excellent team of professionals, I want to take a few moments to review some important history and context. The history of this project and the context in which we have made our plans and prepared our application are critical to understanding our application, and, will answer some of the questions I am sure you will have.

Historical Context – You will no doubt hear a lot about “change” over the course of these hearings, and indeed change is an important theme. Westport has been changing since before it was Westport, and it will continue to change. The organizations and institutions that serve Westport have changed, and will continue to change. Sadly, some institutions have disappeared when they have been unable to change enough to continue to fulfill their role in town. When that happens, the town is changed for the worse.

Westport’s Y will turn 89 years old this December. The first Board meeting was held in 1919, and the main portion of the building we now operate in was completed and dedicated in 1923, making it 85 years old this year. The newest section of the building was built in 1978, and is now 30 years old.

When the Y opened in 1923, there were just over 5,000 people living in Westport. Next year's Board of Education budget forecasts over 5,800 students in our schools, and the present population of Westport is nearly 27,000. That is a lot of change.

When the Y opened in 1923, it provided bowling alleys, pool tables, a reading room, and a gym. There is a spittoon in the wall of the Brophy pool, which opened in 1928. The original plans didn't admit women, but the Y began changing before it even opened, providing for a Women's auxiliary, and a separate entrance for Women on Main Street.

Today the spittoon is a relic, and we admit women through every door and to all activities. The only thing the Y offered in 1923 that we still offer is a gym. Every other thing, every other room, has changed and been adapted to the changes in our community and the ever-changing needs of the people we serve.

Thirteen years ago, in 1995, the Board of the Y appointed a Strategic Planning Committee to determine how we could best improve our service to the towns of Westport and Weston. The formation of this committee was prompted by three things:

- First, an awareness that our community was continuing to change, that its needs were evolving, and that the Y needed to continue to change to meet those needs, as we had by then been remaking ourselves for over 70 years;
- Second, an awareness that many of our programs were at capacity, and that we had no space to add new programming; and
- Third, the knowledge that our building was aging, expensive to maintain, and in many ways unsuitable and inadequate for the modern needs of Westport.

Identifying and Exploring the Needs and Opportunities – The planning committee began with a survey of the entire town, not just our membership. That survey received feedback from 2,400 respondents, of whom about 40% were members, the balance a mix of former members and “never-affiliateds.”

The results of that survey brought into focus the need for new Y facilities. Responses to the survey told us that members wanted a wide variety of improvements, including expanded fitness space, expanded child care, expanded gyms, gymnastics space, and aquatics facilities. And while there was at that time a preference for staying downtown, a large number indicated they would rather move than not improve.

In 2002, we conducted an additional survey of our members. That survey found increasing frustration with the limitations of an old, overcrowded, and obsolescing building. It found strong desires for additional programming in a number of areas, including aquatics, child care, fitness, and mixed use facilities such as meeting space. A majority wanted a new facility.

Almost daily comments to our front desk staff about the limitations of our facilities, the consequent limitations on programs, and inadequate downtown parking continue to reinforce the results of our surveys.

The Y reviewed upwards of 30 alternative sites, including all of the “downtown” sites mentioned in the press and in the comments of Mahackeno opponents: Winslow Park, Baron’s South, the Imperial Avenue Parking Lot, and Jesup Green, as well as several non-downtown sites. We also explored the feasibility of rehabilitating and retrofitting our current facility as well as purchasing the adjacent property on Church Lane.

In many ways, the decision to move to Mahackeno was a direct result of the actions and decisions of a number of town government bodies, including two successive administrations, the Baron’s South Planning Committee, the RTM, and the Planning and Zoning Commission itself.

Every time an official town body of any kind has considered a downtown Y on town land, it has rejected that idea. Every time. Each of these decisions has been made in good faith by the relevant town body, and they have decided time and again that Westport has other uses for town-owned land, rather than allowing a private institution, however worthy, to build on that land. As recently as yesterday, First Selectman Gordon Joseloff reiterated that his administration’s goals for Baron’s South do not include siting the Y there.

(I will leave you with copies of the Baron’s South Planning Committee Report, and a September 28, 2001 memo from the Planning and Zoning Commission to First Selectwoman Diane Farrell which detail objections to siting the Y on town land.)

Our plans also take account of public opinion, including the specific suggestions of numerous letters to the editor and comments from concerned citizens at public meetings in 1999-2002, many of which suggested that we build at Mahackeno, and many of which suggested that we take our traffic out of the congested downtown core.

Mahackeno Is the Only Option – You will be relieved to know that I do not plan to revisit the history of every site. But with respect to the frequently mentioned “downtown” sites,

- None of these sites is owned by the Y;
- None of these sites has ever been made available or offered to the Y;
- None of these sites is available now;
- None of these sites is likely to become available in the future;
- None of these sites would be any less controversial than Mahackeno; and
- None of these sites is as good for the Y or for the town as Mahackeno.

The history of proposals to locate the Y in or near downtown makes it very clear that this simply is not possible. Arguments to the contrary are clearly contradicted by a substantial weight of evidence and a number of specific votes by several town government bodies. The idea that these

bodies would now decide differently is no more than speculation, and is not supported by any evidence.

Under these circumstances, calls for the Y to try pursue yet again the idea of building on town land, however well-intentioned they may be, are little more than fantasy. If you'll forgive the mixed metaphor, we would be beating our head against a dead horse.

The Y has also considered remaining at our present site in two specific contexts: renovating this as our sole site, and renovating it as a partial site while building a satellite facility somewhere else.

Neither of these suggestions is viable or possible. Both are prohibitively expensive to execute and to operate, and neither would permit us to provide Westport with the services it desires and deserves. The cost of renovating the existing facility would exceed \$20 million and likely approach \$30 million. Yet it would yield no additional space, no additional flexibility, and no ability to provide more varied programming. The Town's own renovation of Bedford Middle School into Saugatuck Elementary is ample proof of this challenge, costing over \$20 million while yielding no new space, no additional flexibility.

Renovation would not improve parking for the Y or for downtown generally. And renovation would not improve safety for children, the elderly, and others who are dropped off on Church Lane or who park downtown to use the Y.

The construction of a satellite facility would also be very costly. And the cost of operating two facilities is prohibitively expensive, and would limit potential program synergies and economic efficiencies. For a number of reasons, split facilities also run counter to Y best practices.

The largest source of funding for the new Y will be the sale of our existing building. Our studies show that if we did not sell the existing building, we would be unable to afford renovations or a satellite facility, let alone both. We are under contract for the sale of our current facility. The decision to sell the facility was made by both the Board of Directors and the Board of Trustees with great deliberation and careful study over a period of more than a year. The decision was made in full recognition of our inability to continue to operate indefinitely at a deficit. Regardless of whether we are permitted to build on our land at Mahackeno, both of our Boards recognize that continuing to operate at the current site is untenable.

That's a lot of history, but it's important because it explains that there really is no downtown site available for the Y. The idea of a downtown site, however attractive it may appear to some people, is in reality a pipedream.

Finally, a word about Mahackeno itself. Unlike other sites, we own the property, and have owned it since the 1940s. We have operated our well-loved camp and a number of other outdoor programs there for more than half a century. Did you know it was once the site of the Police Department's firing range? Mahackeno is located in the heart of our Westport/Weston service area, at the junction of two major state roads. Its ample size, over 30 acres, would provide a

beautiful campus setting that would permanently change less than one quarter of the land, leaving three quarters of the land as open space, accessible for use by our members and their families and friends.

The P&Z Application – The present 44 members of our two Boards have a collective residency in Westport and/or Weston of over 1,000 years. And in that time, almost all of us have served in a number of positions in our community, whether as volunteers, elected officials, or appointed members of town boards and commissions. This record of service speaks eloquently to our commitment to our town and our care and respect for our fellow citizens.

As stewards of the Y, we, the members of the Board of Directors and the Board of Trustees during the last 13 years, have felt keenly our obligation to continue to serve our community. The facts are clear, as I have just laid out.

It is, I think, important to recognize that the Y would be opposed in *any* location. As a thought experiment, I encourage you to imagine the uproar if the Y were not located downtown and were here tonight seeking a special permit to build at the corner of the Post Road and Main Street. I daresay the opposition to such a proposal would be more widespread, and possibly more vehement than what we have seen to date.

We are here to ask for a special permit under the laws and regulations designed for that purpose. We already have two special permits: one for the current downtown complex, and one for the camp at Mahackeno. Indeed, we would require a special permit no matter where we were trying to build in Westport.

We will show in the course of our presentation that this application meets the conditions spelled out in the applicable regulations. And we will show that this special permit would be consistent with numerous other special permits that have been granted over the years.

- There are four schools on North Avenue, which is much more residential in nature than Mahackeno;
- A school and a synagogue operate on Hillspoint Road, again, a more residential area than the Merritt Parkway and Route 33;
- Kings Highway School, Saugatuck Elementary, Assumption Church, Landmark Academy, and a nursing home are all clustered in close proximity;
- The Methodist Church, Unitarian Church, and Temple Israel are all close together, and located north of the Merritt in a residential area.

Our application is completely consistent with these and other special permit uses.

In addition, as our experts will detail, our application is consistent with the 2007 Town Plan. You will of course be aware that our search for a new location began before the development of even 1997 Plan, and our original designs were consistent with the 1997 plan. We have paid careful attention to the 2007 plan, and our proposal is in conformity with its objectives.

The Westport Weston Family Y Benefits the Community – Every resident of Westport benefits from the Y, whether they are members or not. We are a volunteer-directed, professionally managed charity that serves the entire community, and will never turn anyone away for inability to pay. We provide constructive activities for young, old and everyone in between. Children involved in Y programs are directed to positive activities, and away from potentially damaging ones like drugs, alcohol, and vandalism. The members of the Town’s Positive Youth Development effort will tell you that the pathologies of wealth aren’t very different from the pathologies of poverty: they just dress better.

Kids involved in Y programs stay healthy, combating the epidemic of childhood obesity that so concerns policy makers. And they learn skills that contribute to their ability to function as adults in our society. Senior citizens use the Y for a broad array of health and wellness programs that prolong and enrich their lives, and that provide a sense of community, a home away from home.

We do this at no cost to the town. No taxpayer dollars are used to fund the Y. The town does not have to provide this type of youth and family programming with tax dollars, because the Y does it. We will continue to do this at Mahackeno, and at the same time, our downtown complex will go onto the tax rolls, providing a direct financial benefit to the town.

The application before you represents the next step in the 89-year evolution of the Y. It is the step we must take if there is to be a Y in Westport. It is, in fact, the step that we must take in order to *preserve the character* of our community. We must build a new building in order to preserve our ability to serve our community. And while it may seem paradoxical, we have to move two miles in order to preserve a vital part of the character of our town, because Westport without a Y is not the same Westport that we all love and call home.

“We will strive increasingly to quicken the sense of civic duty. We will transmit this town greater, better, and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us.”

Those words, part of an ancient Athenian creed, are painted on a mural above the fireplace in the Board Room of the Bedford Building of the Y. They have looked over and guided every decision the Board of Directors and Board of Trustees have made about the future of the Y and the future of Westport for the last 85 years, and every decision we have made in connection with this project. We take those words to heart. We live by those words. The new Y at Mahackeno is a positive step for Westport, a vital improvement in the quality of life in our entire community, and a profound step toward a stronger, better, Westport.

We respectfully request that you approve our application for a special permit.