

O P I N I O N

EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK / Will Rowlands

Turning on Ourselves?

Opinions certainly differ when it comes to the plight of the Westport Weston Family Y. While some of us have very strong opinions on the subject, others probably don't much care where it goes as long as it doesn't affect them personally.

Sadly, the tone of the debate has turned nasty. So nasty, in fact, that it's disturbing.

There are people who treat me differently now because they think I've taken a side. Actually, what I really hope for is that calm deliberation prevails over emotional invective. Like the recent Farrell/Shays brouhaha, the Y controversy has polarized the community. I'm beginning to wonder if there will ever be a time when we aren't at each other's throats.

A number of potential solutions have surfaced. Some are old and some are new. They range from redoing the existing site to Jesup Green, the Imperial Avenue parking lot, Baron's South and Winslow Park.

Some people wonder why the Y doesn't rethink its position. After 10 years and some false starts, the Y has *already* rethought its position, probably more than once for that matter. Anyone who was around to see the Y vilified for wanting to build on Baron's South knows this. Since then the Y has considered some 39 sites in Westport and beyond before arriving at Mahackeno.

Some of the sites held promise. I was at the Imperial Avenue site with Dick Foot, the Y's former executive director, when the Y had test holes drilled. The area used to be a dump. Unfortunately, construction would be more costly there and remediation would be an issue as well. In addition, I've been told the 50-meter pool wouldn't fit in that location.

Baron's South is another site that's men-

tioned frequently. Years ago the Y was slammed for wanting to build there. In the end the town decided not to make it available anyway. And now, of course, the Westport Center for Senior Activities is there. The Y was criticized for wanting to build on Baron's South then and now it's being criticized for not wanting to build there. On top of that, the Town of Westport has never officially offered Baron's South to the Y. Sometimes you can't win for losing.

Winslow Park is another town-owned parcel that is mentioned as being an ideal site for the new Y. It's downtown, the Y could tie into sewer lines and the property, except for dog owners (many of them out-of-towners), is underutilized. So what's the problem? Well, once again the town has never offered Winslow to the Y. And, even though the town bought Winslow for municipal use, Planning and Zoning subsequently designated it passive open space. Then again, what can be rezoned could theoretically be rezoned again, especially if it's the best solution and the public demands it. Unfortunately, pursuing this option would almost certainly cause an uproar among dog owners and open space advocates. Still, compromise is a solution that nobody likes but everybody can accept.

People wonder why the Y won't build on one of these town-owned properties. The answer is simple, *the Town of Westport has never made them an offer.*

Our first selectman has plans for reorganizing some core services in the area of Jesup Green and the police station. Perhaps there are some possibilities there. Then again, that would be many years down the road and, again, no offers have been proffered.

I've been listening to all sides of this story for years. Do I have strong personal feelings about it? Not really. Still, is there an alternative that's a personal favorite? Sure. Actually, there are a couple alternatives that sound appealing.

I've always been intrigued by the concept of a Y with direct access to the navigable portion of the Saugatuck River. And, except for some potential parking and traffic problems, Winslow could fit the bill.

Of course, it doesn't really matter what I think. The Y has made its decision and, unless someone makes them a pretty good offer, the die is cast.

If give-and-take and compromise are to be possible then there must be some options on the table. If open space advocates want to "save" Mahackeno they may have to offer the Y part of Winslow. I'm pretty sure the Y would trade the northern half of Mahackeno for the northern half of Winslow.

If environmental concerns are really foremost, then the Y should be allowed to tie into a sewer line at Mahackeno or the Town of Westport should offer them a sewer-served alternative.

Alas, there are deeper issues here. Do we all have a right to tell the Y what it can and cannot do with its own property? Telling the Y it can't touch its own property seems tantamount to an eminent domain land grab. P&Z has even designated Mahackeno open space. *Hello*, it's private property.

Every way the Y turns it faces closed doors and detractors, but it's illogical to criticize the Y for not pursuing options that don't exist. After the sale of its downtown facility, Mahackeno is the only option left.

We all have a right to our opinion but the

issues are complex and sometimes counterintuitive. More people, for example, would be able to enjoy Mahackeno if the new Y is situated there. Like Winslow, one can pose the question: Shouldn't these spaces be enjoyed by the majority of citizens?

Do we really want an on-site wastewater treatment system on the Saugatuck River? Of course not. The only reason the Y pursued that path is because they had no other choice. The Y was prevented accessing a sewer line in the area by the actions of local activists. Now they're being criticized for pursuing the only option that was left open to them. Again, they can't win for losing. And why wasn't Greens Farms Academy's system questioned? It's much nearer to Long Island Sound and adjoins a wetland.

A lot of what we're seeing now is less a discussion of relevant issues and more an attempt to paint the Y in a bad light. The most recent example involves complaints about children attending the last meeting of the Conservation Commission in support of the Y. Children have attended meetings in Town Hall in the past and no one complained. Why is it a problem now all of a sudden?

Casting aspersions adds little to the conversation, rather it alienates and polarizes. If we want the Y to change its mind, they need a viable option. I suspect they'd jump at a bona fide offer from the town. Does anyone think they're enjoying this?

In any case, it looks like it's out of our hands. It's up to the Conservation Commission, the P&Z and the state DEP. And, after that, of course, the lawyers. No matter how it turns out, more lawsuits are a virtual certainty. Unless, of course, someone makes the Y an offer it can't refuse.

